casual ⚙ connect

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ASSOCIATION

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Letter from the Director

'll be honest with you: This "recovery" is taking longer than I'd like. I don't mean to minimize the progress that has been made, but there are still too many people out of work and too few companies willing to hire like they mean it. Things are getting better, but they're not getting better enough.

In spite of that, we are among the lucky few who find ourselves in a growing market segment—even while others in gaming are facing steep declines. We continue to find new monetization models and distribution methods that are bringing more and more paying customers into our marketplace. Even for those who may not have released their first really big hit, there is plenty of evidence that the opportunity is out there.

This issue of Casual Connect is proof of that. In it, we highlight a variety of ways that companies both new and old have hit it big in casual gaming. As you read, you'll notice that what is hot now isn't the same as what was hot five or 10 years ago, but the core principles of success are simply the same: make a game people want to play and give them a way to pay you for it. And you may also notice that many of those finding success on today's new social and mobile platforms were successful a decade ago—long before Facebook even existed.

It's an important reminder of what we have said all along: Keep it fun and you won't have to worry about a "recovery." To the contrary, before long you'll be hiring like you mean it.

Jessica

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Sven is the proxy of Tipp24 Entertainment GmbH, Hamburg, Germany. Since 2008, he has been responsible for everything at www.tipp24games.de. He has been working in the New Economy for 12 years now and is always open to new ideas in the field of online gaming and skill games. Ivo holds a degree in Business Studies.
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Stephanie is the Product Lead of *Monster World* at wooga (world of gaming), a top 20 social game on Facebook with over a million daily users and over seven million monthly active users. She is responsible for the design and development of *Monster World,* leading a team of 15.
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Matthew is the director of KlickTock, an independent video game company located on a sheep farm in rural Australia. He has 11 years of professional experience developing games across a wide variety of platforms and disciplines. KlickTock opened in 2009 and has released three games on iOS: *Super Search 60, Doodle Find* and *Little Things*.
Edenhope, Australia

When approached about doing a cover for this publication, Present Creative tasked its internal artists to use their preferred graphic style and come up with a character inspired by their favorite game. The company's founders then incorporated these images together into one unified piece. The result is an illustration that reflects the overall versatility and variation that exist in today's casual mobile and social games industry.

Present Creative is a San Francisco-based full service game development studio with a focus on quality art. The agency works closely with its clients to establish sustainable production pipelines. This process helps to maintain high-quality art while keeping production costs down. By recently adding industry veterans from companies such as EA, Namco and Blizzard, Present Creative has grown from a game art studio into a complete game development and design studio.

The individual contributing artists are Aletta Wenas, Zachary Present (Founder), Hector Ortiz, Joshua Clements, Nick Kiripolsky, Jessica Mayer, James Larson, Phil Jaeger, Angela Vanden Tak, Rachelle Daniele, Marv Riley, and Ben Sutherland (Founder).

New & Notable

Making Massively Multiplayer, Engagingly Social Games

A Conversation with Kabam's Chris Carvalho & Boris Pfeiffer

Interview by Javier Sancho

In contrast to most social gaming companies, Kabam specializes in making what it calls Massively Multiplayer Social Games, or MMSGs. Unlike casual social games, MMSGs provide synchronous gameplay in which people play with and against other players in real time in persistent game worlds. Intrigued, we sat down with Boris Pfeiffer, Kabam-Europe's Managing Director,

and Chris Carvalho, the COO, to get further insight into the company's strategy and plans for the future.

"Our focus is on combining traditional and social gaming to create deeper, more engaging social games," says Carvalho. "Games like *Kingdoms of Camelot* are designed for the new generation of serious gamers moving from PC and console to social media. MMSGs integrate

this generation's love of gaming with their desire to connect with friends on social networks."

Massively Multiplayer Social Games

Pfeiffer is excited to work on the future of online free-to-play browser games because he feels Kabam can offer a richer game-play experience through a browser than is currently available in social games: "Our games feature much more game-play compared to other social game companies that focus on an often derivative casual game formula."

Kabam's games contain components closer to those found within traditional MMOs. "Our games are very different from casual so-

> "Our focus is on combining traditional and social gaming to create deeper, more engaging social games," says Carvalho. "MMSGs integrate this generation's love of gaming with their desire to connect with friends on social networks."

cial games since our games create persistent worlds comprised of thousands of people," Carvalho explains. "Whereas casual games allow engagement only with other players *outside* the game, we enable players to engage in synchronous game-play: Gamers are playing with and against real people in real time within the context of the game itself."

Kingdoms of Camelot

Pfeiffer adds, "You're forming alliances in *Glory of Rome* and developing coordinated attack strategies with large groups of players in *Kingdoms of Camelot*. You can play with your friends or you can play with people who are not yet your Facebook friends. We've found many players make new friends on Facebook through their involvement in our games."

This approach to social gaming clearly makes sense for Kabam's games. Traditional MMOs and even other online genres such as first-person-shooters also contain social interaction outside and within the game, but it's segregated into multiple forums, fan sites, chat rooms, and game-specific social networks (such as Rockstar's Social Club). Kabam's MMSGs have the advantage of being embedded in a social network with an enormous user base.

But how do Kabam's social games grow if they don't use pandemic, viral strategies like other companies do? Kabam's approach comes down to developing games for a targeted game-enthusiast audience (as opposed to a mass audience) and emphasizing a quality, deeply-engaging game experience. "Our heavy players will spend as much as four hours per day playing our games, which is very different from the 'in-and-out' game sessions for casual

games," says Carvalho. "As a result, our 5.5 million monthly users in *Kingdoms of Camelot* compare very favorably with casual games that have as many as 100 million users."

Features such as alliances further the social element of game-play and extend the engagement among players. Pfeiffer explains the experience of Kabam's games in a truly fitting metaphor: "Our players meet online to form strategic, sometimes elaborate battle and defense plans. You don't form an alliance to water someone's plants."

Kabam's Explosive Growth

Kabam has grown from 20 employees at the beginning of 2010 to over 300 today, including the newly opened Kabam-Europe. "As we've grown, we've worked very hard to put together a world-class management team to harness the incredible resources of our studios so that we can create games that can scale across millions of players," says Carvalho. "Our team is drawn from the best of the worlds of gaming and technology, with leaders from Electronic Arts, Google, Intuit, PayPal, and Lucasfilm working together to turn Kabam's vision of MMSGs into reality."

Pfeiffer concurs: "Chris and Kevin (Chou, Kabam CEO) have hired a world-class manage-

ment team—excellent people with lots of experience in running and growing game companies. And each of those individuals has done an outstanding job managing the growth."

With Kabam's rapid rate of growth, one might assume the creative freedom of the studios is at peril, but as Pfeiffer explains it, quite the opposite is true: "The studios have a lot more resources and back-office support now, which actually gives them more creative freedom. As a small studio, it is harder to try something different while staying competitive. Having all these resources at hand allows you to really focus on the game you want to make—instead of everything around it."

So what is the secret? "When you're a company of 25 people you can go to your CEO for pretty much all the decisions and he will be able to oversee everything. If you grow to 275 but still want to keep a centralized decision-making process and have everything checked and vetted, you're not going to be able to achieve your goal," Pfeiffer answers. "The philosophy of Kabam is to give power to the people, give power to the department managers, have them push all the decisions downwards as much as possible, which gives the game teams all the flexibility and responsibility they require."

Carvalho believes it is relatively easy to handle growth by creating individual studios that are more or less independent. "The difficulty lies more in your back-office functions: growing your IT department, growing your server hosting, growing your network and HR. These functions are much harder to scale compared to getting a studio to work on the games they want to make. I see the challenge in equipping that studio, allowing it to work

> ## Kabam's approach comes down to developing games for a targeted game-enthusiast audience (as opposed to a mass audience) and emphasizing a quality, deeply-engaging game experience.

Kabam

A day in the life at Kabam's recently opened office in Luxembourg. The localization team is working hard translating Kabam's games into local markets' gaming lingo.

The philosophy of Kabam is to give power to the people, give power to the department managers, have them push all the decisions downwards as much as possible, which gives the game teams all the flexibility and responsibility they require.

in our infrastructure, and giving it the resources it needs. That is difficult."

Localized Expansion

Equipping future studios with resources is Pfeiffer's current main task in Europe. Before starting a new studio and adding another level of complexity, he wants to build a world-class localization and foreign-language tech support team of 40 to 60 people to focus on the European market. Kabam recently announced a deal with Plinga that will help it spread its games to European social networks such as the Dutch network Hyves and the Polish network Nasza Klasa.

"Kabam is committed to growing its games and business globally," says Pfeiffer. "We currently translate games into a total of 11 languages, and we're working on launching each of our games in at least eight different languages. We're also aiming for smaller markets like Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands. We don't need huge numbers. We can do okay with smaller but very engaged numbers because we don't go after the typical casual gamer profile on Facebook."

Carvalho explains it succinctly: "We're going after the core gamers who play more and spend more than the typical casual game audience of middle-aged moms. In a very short time, we've become the leader in creating attractive social games for this core gamer audience."

Pfeiffer believes good internalized localization is an important cornerstone for achieving Kabam's goals in Europe. "We did tests where we localized some of the games using real game-players to translate games into gamer vernacular and compared the results with the external localization. We were able to show that it massively increases profitability and player satisfaction in the game," Pfeiffer explains. "Our games are a little different. There's depth and a certain theme, so if you want to localize *Glory of Rome* or *Camelot* you have to get into the theme. We play the game a lot, watch medieval movies to find the right language that the game requires. It's a lot of work, but it's worth it." �
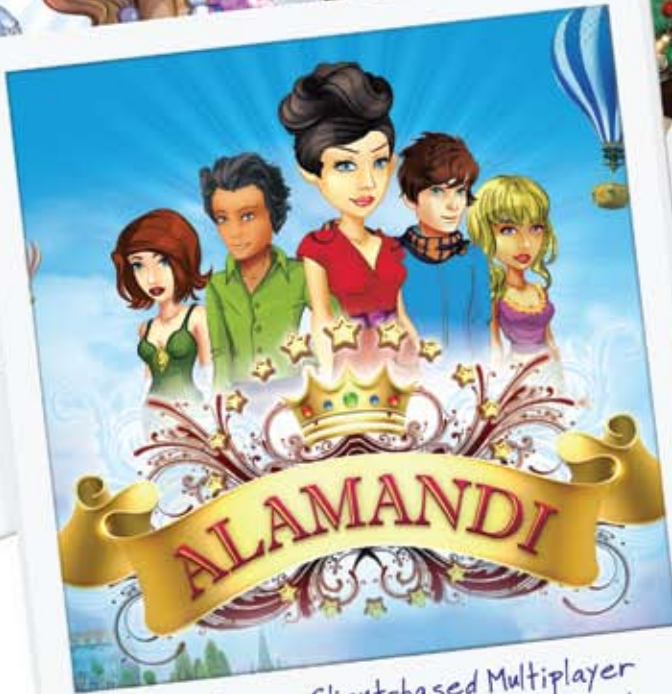
A Picture Is Worth A Thousand Words

When Zombies Come To Life

The Creative Evolution of *Zombie Tycoon*

As one of Canada's leading independent game developers, Frima Studio uses its multi-platform expertise to produce outstanding Internet, mobile, and console games, as well as animations and special effects for TV and film. Thanks to its 275-person team, Frima has emerged as a leader in the gaming industry with hit titles like *Pocket God* and *A Space Shooter for 2 Bucks!*. In this postmortem, Christian Daigle, VP-Creation, describes his experience with *Zombie Tycoon,* one of Frima's most popular and successful IPs.

We originally hatched the idea behind *Zombie Tycoon* in 2007. The popularity of both tycoon and zombie games gave us the idea to merge them into one title. With the notion of developing a mobile game, our team started sketching an impressive collection of 2D zombies. Like most of Frima's games, we made the visual style of *Zombie Tycoon* strongly satirical and cartoony.

The Zombies Roam

We loved the initial art and concept, but we also wanted to make sure *Zombie Tycoon* had a unique premise and a fantastic story. While the concept art was originally 2D, we realized early on that a mixed-visual approach would work best for the game. We discovered that in order to properly display our vision for the game, we had to use a mixed 2D/3D approach.

The game is played in a faraway, slanted bird's-eye view, and the world, the environment and the characters are all rendered in a cartoony 3D style. As we wanted to be able to put as many zombies on the screen as possible, we could not do very detailed 3D zombies and characters. We concentrated most of our efforts on creating fluid animation in the game. For the cut scenes, we decided to go with Flash 2D cartoons, as our team already had strong expertise in that area. These choices gave us the opportunity to go deeper into the characters' personalities and to explore the humorous aspects of the game with sarcastic and funny dialogue that our original idea would not have enabled us to do. The change in artistic direction also helped us realize that our initial idea to launch a mobile phone game was not best for *Zombie Tycoon*. We switched to the PSN, where the first game in our series launched in 2009 on the Minis for PSP and PS3.

PSP

Flash Molehill

Gameplay Sketch
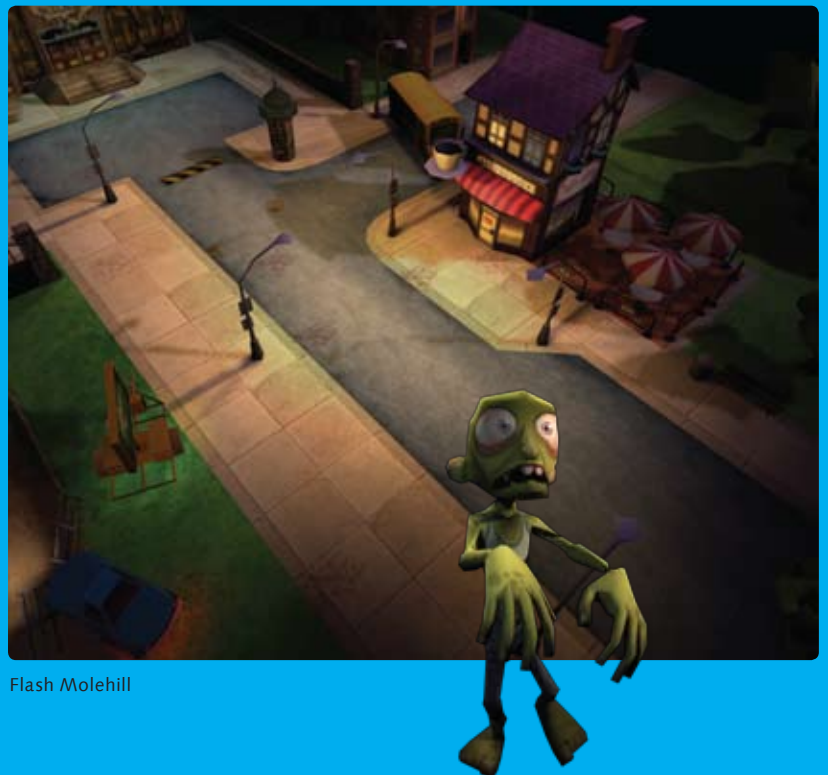
The Creative Evolution of *Zombie Tycoon*

PSP

Flash Molehill

Early 3D render of Tycoon for the HD animations

Ernest and Tycoon, the brand's main characters in the PSP's cut scenes.

The Zombies Get a Facelift

Frima's focus on being a technology leader resulted in our studio being selected as one of the few companies to participate in the pre-release program of Adobe's new 3D Flash technology, Stage 3D. We partnered with Adobe to produce a playable demo of *Zombie Tycoon* for this new technology. Stage 3D allowed us to improve the quality of the game tremendously. With few constraints, our artists gave more definition to both zombies and backgrounds, and added details like dynamic lighting, shadows and fog.

As the 3D PSP models were not in HD, our team had to redo artistic work on the zombies and main characters (turning some of our people into crazy zombies themselves!). With the existing 2D items developed for the PSP cut scenes, we modeled new and more precise 3D characters. In addition to creating new 3D models for the Molehill version of *Zombie Tycoon*, the HD animation was also used for the demo's intro.

As you can see, our zombies' creative evolution over the years has been extraordinary! We went from 2D (with just a few polygons) to 3D (with many polygons), and finally gave our zombies a well-deserved facelift before hitting HD.

Proportions   283 triangles   892 triangles   ~160K triangles

What's Next for *Zombie Tycoon*?

Zombie Tycoon is much more than a great story and concept. In many ways, the game's success can be attributed to taking a holistic approach to the game, making sure that each aspect works in tandem with the game's mechanical design to improve the game's feel, play and story. For this reason, we did not choose between 2D and 3D. We decided to keep both styles alive in the various versions of the game. Throughout the evolution of the brand, the story and premise led to the change in the art that gave our brand its unique graphic signature. That signature will follow the brand in the future as our team is planning a sequel to *Zombie Tycoon* (scheduled to launch in late 2012). We are also using the *Zombie Tycoon* artwork and style to develop an animated 3D series on TV that we hope will be further in development soon.

By the Numbers

Moving Your Download Game Customers to Social Games with Analytics

It seems the whole world is diversifying their deluxe download games to social games—even though games released on social networks face many challenges. Barriers to entry are so low that anyone who can code (and perhaps even those who should not), can publish games. The result is a quagmire of products all vying for gamers' eyeballs.

Especially in this cluttered environment, analytics are massively important to the propagation of game success. In fact, I believe that analytics are now just as important as game design. The social platforms, augmented with some simple tools, enable the tracking of practically any statistic you wish to measure about your game (and its players), and with the careful application of the science of analytics you can optimize your game for both playability and profit. With the large denominators of players who play social games, moving the needle just a fraction of a percent to improve the response rate of any offer can make a measurable difference to your bottom line.

But how do you get started? Let's say that all you've published until now are deluxe download games. How do you make the transition into social? How do you move your brand (and your customers) over efficiently?

It's not an easy jump to make. What do you know about your current download customers? What interests do your existing customers have outside of your game? And how can you use that knowledge to attract new customers? Publishers already in the social space are spoiled with demographic information. In my previous article (see *Casual Connect*, Winter 2011), I shared the demographic curves I was able to compile for existing social games. How do we go about generating these curves for download games?

What's in a Name?

The information most deluxe download developers have about their customers is pretty thin. Chances are that it's limited to credit card details, email addresses, and possibly registration names. Nothing about age or gender… or is there?

My name is Nicholas. If you did not know me, and simply read my name at the top of this article, the chances are you'd probably guess I was a man. And, you'd be correct. In fact, you'd be correct 99.6% of the time; most of the people in the USA named Nicholas have a Y-chromosome. Similarly, if my name were Jessica, you'd assume I was a woman. However, if my name were Pat or Taylor or Jessie, you'd be less certain of my gender, as these are names which, to varying degrees, are used as first names by both sexes.

By knowing that some names are used primarily by males, some by females, and some mixed, it is possible to cross-reference this information with the names from the credit cards of the deluxe download purchasers. Using this technique, we can work out an approximate gender breakdown of our customers.

How do we deal with the androgynous names? How do we get an approximation of the number of Taylors who are men, and the number of Taylors who are women?

Thankfully, this information is part of the public domain. In the USA, the Social Security Administration collects statistics of all registered names and records these, by gender, by year. This data is available going all the way back to 1880. Using this we can learn that in 2009, for instance, 87.4% of the people registered as Taylor were female. In the same year, 47.5% of those registered as Jessie were similarly female.

Figure 2 shows examples of the recent gender breakdown of a few random names. Names like Mary are exclusively female (shown as pink bars on the left). Those like Christopher are exclusively male (shown as blue bars on the right). The overall length of the bars represents the relative popularity of the name. There are currently approximately the same number of children being registered as Riley, Jordan and Dylan but the former is biased more towards girls, and the latter biased towards boys.

Trends in naming, however, have changed over time. In 1985, just 36.9% of the people registered as Taylor were female. *Figure 3* shows a graph of the distributions of the use of Taylor over the last 40 years. Popularity of Taylor peaked in 1993 with 28,955 registrations over both genders. Before 1970, hardly any children were given the name Taylor, and in 1960, there were less than 100. If we based our deluxe download sales approximation solely on the current trend in naming, we'd get skewed results.

Because the popularity of Taylor has changed over the years, if I pulled out a name from the sales record database, and it was Taylor, I could work out the probability of this person's age (and gender). It's a very small probability that this Taylor was born in 1950 (there were only 85 of them, none of which, were women), and much more probable that they were born in 1994. What I need is a table of all the Taylors still alive along with their ages. With that information, I can create a probability density graph.

Nobody lives forever, so it's practically impossible that the Taylor I pulled from the sales database was one of the 37 born in 1890 (unless he is over 120 years old!). And it would have to be a "he" in this case, because there were no registered females with the name Taylor in 1890.

It's also highly unlikely that the Taylor we pulled from the database was one of the 88 Taylors born in 1925 (they would be 86 this year). Granted, 86 years old is not ancient, and some people do live this long—but not many do, and there were not many of them to start with.

What we need, then, is a measure of life expectancy that gives us the percentage of people that live to a certain age. With that addition-

by Nick Berry;
president, DataGenetics;
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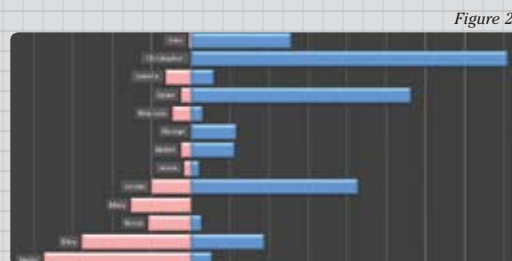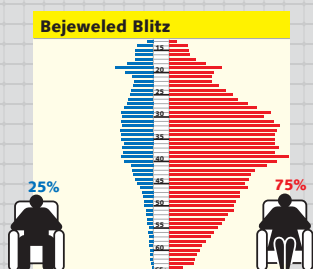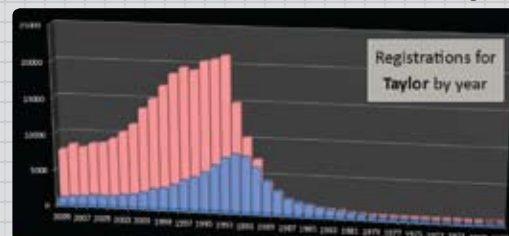
Figure 2

Figure 3

Figure 4
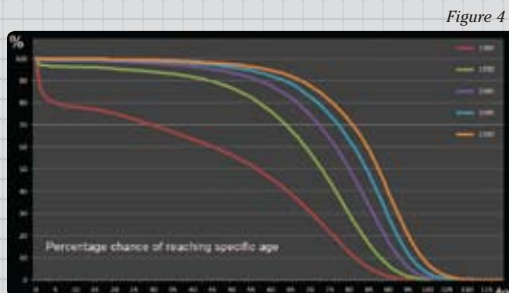
Figure 5
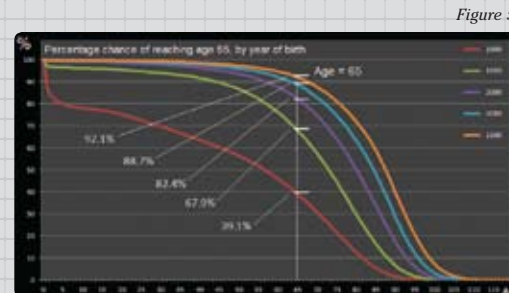
Bejeweled Blitz
25%   75%

al information, we could work out the probability that a Taylor born in 1933 was still alive and thus, out of the 77 born that year, how many are still around. With this information, we can work out the distribution of all the Taylors who are still alive and breathing.

There's an added complication in that one's life expectancy varies by gender and also by the year you were born. People born in the 1900s have a much shorter life expectancy than people born in the year 2000. This should come as no surprise; every year we get better medicines and understand more how to cure, fix and prolong life. Intense manual labor is not as prevalent these days, and there are fewer globally-appalling wars. The combination of all these things means that, as time goes on, life expectancy is improving.

Life expectancy data is also available from the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention/National Center for Health Statistics (CDC/NCHS). I'll spare you all the gory details, but to obtain accurate life expectancy data, I waded through reams of poorly printed government issued scanned antique documents of life expectancy for the year 1901 and transcribed the data.

Figure 4 shows some interesting analysis of this data. It shows the percentage chance of people attaining a certain age, based on the year of their birth (I've averaged out males and females in this chart, in the interest of readability). To read the chart, look up the desired age along the x-axis, and then follow it up to the line corresponding to the year of birth. The percentage indicated on the y-axis for the intercept represents the percentage of people born that year, who, on average, will survive to at least that age.

It's tragic to look at the far left of the red curve. In the 1900s, the first few years of life were pretty traumatic: 13 percent of those born did not make it to their first birthday, and 20 percent did not make it to five years old. Things were a lot better in 1950, shown by the green line, where 3 percent did not make it to one year old. Thankfully, in 2000, first-year mortality has been reduced to 0.7 percent, and by 2100, the projections have it at just 0.1 percent.

To illustrate the significance of year of birth, *Figure 5* shows the range of percentages of people who are expected to reach the age of 65, based on their year of birth. Just 39.1 percent of people born in 1900 achieved the age of 65. The projection is that 67.9 percent of people born in the 1950s will reach the age of at least 65, increasing to 82.4 percent for those born in 2000. For those who will be born in 2050, the projection is 88.7 percent, and by 2100, it is predicted that 92.1 percent of people born will reach at least 65 years of age.

Returning to Taylor

So now we have a way to calculate the number of Taylors in the country who are still breathing:

The number of Taylors in the USA =
   (The number of Taylors born in 2010)
 + (The number of Taylors born in 2009 who are still alive)
 + (The number of Taylors born in 2008 who are still alive) …
 + (The number of Taylors born in 1930 who are still alive)
 + (The number of Taylors born in 1929 who are still alive)

Figure 6 is a graphical representation of the distribution of these Taylors based on age/gender. It shows the probability that the Taylor we examined will be in that age/gender bracket. (Females are shown on the right, males on the left. Newborns are shown at the top of the graph, and age increases as you move down the table). This chart was created by starting with the number of Taylors who were born in the corresponding year for that age, and discounting each row based on the life expectancy/survivability of people with that age and gender. For Taylor, it's clear that it's a modern name and I've truncated the table at age 40.

Moving Download Customers with Analytics

Figure 6

Taylor

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
0.285%	0	1.979%
0.421%	5	2.430%
0.800%	10	4.414%
1.719%	15	5.401%
1.251%	20	1.055%
0.360%	25	0.224%
0.112%	30	0.038%
0.045%	35	0.010%
0.028%	40	0.004%

Figure 10

Ethel

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
0.000%	0-9	0.357%
0.000%	10-19	0.532%
0.000%	20-29	1.050%
0.000%	30-39	2.816%
0.053%	40-49	8.542%
0.086%	50-59	19.474%
0.119%	60-69	27.793%
0.169%	70-79	24.220%
0.060%	80-89	13.274%
0.004%	90-99	1.442%
0.000%	100-109	0.008%

Figure 7

Mary

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
0.005%	0-9	2.296%
0.010%	10-19	3.758%
0.030%	20-29	4.737%
0.032%	30-39	6.136%
0.061%	40-49	16.705%
0.062%	50-59	27.389%
0.067%	60-69	22.619%
0.048%	70-79	11.627%
0.011%	80-89	4.103%
0.000%	90-99	0.303%
0.000%	100-109	0.001%

Figure 8

John

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
5.299%	0-9	0.010%
7.870%	10-19	0.016%
10.330%	20-29	0.070%
12.536%	30-39	0.077%
21.233%	40-49	0.086%
21.219%	50-59	0.058%
14.250%	60-69	0.048%
5.179%	70-79	0.033%
1.565%	80-89	0.015%
0.104%	90-99	0.001%
0.000%	100-109	0.000%

Figure 9

Florence

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
0.000%	0-9	1.021%
0.000%	10-19	1.410%
0.000%	20-29	2.148%
0.000%	30-39	3.700%
0.052%	40-49	8.184%
0.023%	50-59	15.817%
0.084%	60-69	24.157%
0.118%	70-79	25.042%
0.051%	80-89	16.467%
0.003%	90-99	1.716%
0.000%	100-109	0.007%

Figure 11

Harry

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
3.030%	0-9	0.000%
3.786%	10-19	0.000%
5.175%	20-29	0.042%
7.757%	30-39	0.073%
14.399%	40-49	0.082%
24.448%	50-59	0.095%
23.850%	60-69	0.100%
11.719%	70-79	0.076%
4.936%	80-89	0.045%
0.382%	90-99	0.003%
0.001%	100-109	0.000%

Figure 12

Clarence

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
2.453%	0-9	0.000%
4.280%	10-19	0.009%
6.822%	20-29	0.070%
9.567%	30-39	0.115%
14.977%	40-49	0.144%
22.466%	50-59	0.152%
20.507%	60-69	0.137%
12.556%	70-79	0.102%
5.207%	80-89	0.047%
0.383%	90-99	0.003%
0.001%	100-109	0.000%

Figure 13

Clara

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
0.007%	0-9	16.808%
0.007%	10-19	8.145%
0.023%	20-29	4.775%
0.006%	30-39	4.228%
0.012%	40-49	8.105%
0.034%	50-59	14.777%
0.057%	60-69	18.461%
0.086%	70-79	16.529%
0.026%	80-89	7.213%
0.002%	90-99	0.696%
0.000%	100-109	0.003%

Figure 14

Sarah

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
0.026%	0-9	14.418%
0.041%	10-19	25.962%
0.127%	20-29	31.304%
0.048%	30-39	13.468%
0.016%	40-49	4.813%
0.011%	50-59	4.069%
0.010%	60-69	3.267%
0.009%	70-79	1.734%
0.002%	80-89	0.621%
0.000%	90-99	0.054%
0.000%	100-109	0.000%

Figure 15

Jessie

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
4.602%	0-9	4.670%
7.611%	10-19	8.329%
9.291%	20-29	8.938%
6.382%	30-39	3.539%
6.463%	40-49	3.263%
6.743%	50-59	5.499%
5.071%	60-69	6.966%
2.906%	70-79	5.648%
1.016%	80-89	2.719%
0.068%	90-99	0.274%
0.000%	100-109	0.001%

Figures 7 through *15* show a selection of the surviving gender/age breakdowns for a selection of names with the granularity of age reduced to 10 years. *Figure 10* shows that if you meet an Ethel she is most likely to be between 60 and 69 years of age. (Even though Ethel was a *more* popular name earlier than that, sadly there are not many Ethels still alive who were born in 1920 or before.) These histograms show the probability density that a person you meet of that name is of that age and gender.

Using the data in *Figure 6,* we can predict that, if you meet a Taylor, there is a 44 percent chance that she is a girl between the age of 10 and 19. If you meet a Mary, the highest probability is that she is between the ages of 50 and 59; John would most likely be between 40 and 59, Florence between 70 and 79, Clarence 50 and 59, Sarah 20 and 29, and so on.

Practical Demonstration: Poker Cards

So how would we use this sort of analysis on a customer database? I'll show you how I applied this technique at my company GreatPoker-Hands.

The first step was to process the sales data to extract just the first name from the sales records. By doing this, I removed any potential privacy implications associated with the storage and use of personally identifiable information, as first name alone is not sufficient information to uniquely identify a person. We only need the first name for this analysis. In addition, using just first name makes for smaller file sizes, which can be important if the database is large!

Figure 16 shows a breakdown of the most popular names of my customers (the bars show the relative volume of sales for each name). At first glance, the names appear entirely male-biased. However, we need to be careful not to draw wrong conclusions from this. This table only represents the most popular (modal) names. There is a very long

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Moving Download Customers with Analytics

tail of unique names with low frequency counts. Also, there is much more variance in the spellings of female names (plus a wider variety of starting names). These facts mean that, the further down the tail you get, the higher the concentration of female names becomes. There is an important lesson here: If we just took a sample of the *top* records in sales we'd have a very skewed (and inaccurate) representation of our audience because much of the variety of customers lies in the collection of all the little records.

Figure 18 shows the results of applying the probability distribution for the entire sales database. It appears that the gender breakdown of GreatPokerHands customers is 84% male, with a strong band between the age of 40 and 59. This histogram was created by the superposition of the probability curves for all the sales record names, weighted appropriately for the frequency of each name.

If we apply the additional constraint that people under the age of 18 typically do not possess a credit card, and re-run the analysis we get a slightly more accurate profile (interestingly, this does not adjust the demographic split very much). These results are shown in *Figure 19*.

Advertising

Now that we have our profile curve for sales records, we can go back and compare these curves with curves we have determined for other applications, such as the fans of activities on Facebook. As an example, *Figure 17* shows demographic curves of *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. (Again, you should refer to my article in the last *Casual Connect* magazine for details about these curves).

Figure 20 shows the percentage correlation between the profile curve for GreatPokerHand sales and 188 keywords on Facebook (a selection of fan sites, games, brands and applications on the platform).

At the top, in position number one, is GreatPokerHands (there is 100 percent correlation between the GreatPokerHands sales curve and itself). Next in similarity, in position number two, with a 74.77 percent correlation (calculated using a technique similar to Chi-Squared matching) is Golf, followed by *Star Trek*, Scuba Diving and NASCAR.

Fishing comes next, followed by Investing (which makes sense considering the mathematical nature of poker, and the desire to speculate and accumulate wealth), followed by Chess, and then Dilbert.

At the other end of the probability scale, GreatPokerHand customers are least likely to be interested in Tiny Prints (Poker players, it seems, are not very interested in making wedding invites, or custom greetings cards!). They are also not likely to be into sewing, knitting or cake decorating. On TV, they probably are not excited by *Sex and the City, Americas Next Top Model* or *Desperate Housewives*. They don't listen to Justin Bieber, play *Pokemon* or *Sorority Life* games (oh, and they don't wear make-up!).

How to Use This Information

How does this kind of analysis help you migrate your deluxe download customers to social games? Unless you are incredibly fortunate and stumble upon a disruptive marketing mechanism for your product, you are probably going to be investing in the purchase of keywords to drive traffic to your game.

Figure 16

Figure 17

Oprah

11%   89%

Figure 18

Gender of GreatPokerHands customers

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
6.829%	0-9	1.033%
8.209%	10-19	1.331%
10.118%	20-29	1.740%
11.108%	30-39	2.269%
17.174%	40-49	3.279%
16.594%	50-59	3.213%
9.646%	60-69	1.827%
3.589%	70-79	0.747%
1.008%	80-89	0.208%
0.060%	90-99	0.017%
0.000%	100-109	0.000%

84.34%   **15.66%**

Figure 19

Gender of GreatPokerHands customers

MALE	AGE	FEMALE
0.000%	0-9	0.000%
1.488%	10-19	0.281%
13.907%	20-29	2.471%
13.867%	30-39	2.734%
19.849%	40-49	3.639%
18.939%	50-59	3.491%
10.922%	60-69	1.980%
4.088%	70-79	0.820%
1.199%	80-89	0.235%
0.071%	90-99	0.019%
0.000%	100-109	0.000%

84.33%   **15.67%**

Figure 20

	Keywords	
1	GPH Sales	100%
2	Golf	74.77%
3	Star Trek	67.32%
4	Scuba Diving	65.93%
5	NASCAR	65.56%
6	Fishing	64.95%
7	Investing	63.08%
8	Chess	61.76%
9	Dilbert	61.68%
178	Justin Bieber	23.11%
179	Desperate Housewives	22.97%
180	America's Next Top Model	21.80%
181	Pokemon	20.77%
182	Knitting	19.64%
183	Cake Decorating	19.21%
184	Makeup	18.26%
185	Sex and the City	18.02%
186	Sorority Life	17.54%
187	Sewing	17.35%
188	Tiny Prints	17.06%

The art and science of keyword selection is not just about buying the obvious keywords for your application, it's about how to be smart about bidding on keywords to lower the acquisition costs of new users. For example, in the poker example above, I've identified a strong affinity between poker players and golfers and scuba divers. For various reasons (primarily because of the high bounty paid by online casinos for new customers), purchasing poker-related keywords online is restrictively expensive. Instead of competing for the costly poker-related keywords, I can purchase significantly cheaper impressions based on these alternate interests. I will be buying keywords with a statistically strong affinity to my desired audience at a lower expected cost. ❈

Postmortem: Focus on Social

Since casual games on social networks exploded in popularity in 2008, the scope and sophistication of the social game genera has gone through many changes—to the point that now we see new genres emerging on a variety of social platforms. In this issue, we'll take a look at several examples of successful social games: an RPG *(Crime City),* a farming game *(Monster World),* and a match-three puzzle *(Bejeweled Blitz).* How did they do it? And better yet: What would you have to do to replicate their success? – ed.

1

Social RPGs: The Next Generation
A *Crime City* Postmortem

When I joined Funzio, *Crime City* had just started. There were fewer than 10 employees, and the company had been around only a few months. *Crime City*'s rendering engine had just gotten off the ground. The tile engine had been built, you could place and rotate buildings, and there was a single character roaming around the screen. The directive had been given: to make the next generation, text-based RPG—or to be more precise: to make a graphical version of the text-based RPG.

Text-based RPGs like *Mafia Wars* and *Sorority Life* had grown quite popular on Facebook, but no one had brought one to the current generation. We were surrounded by more casual titles like *FarmVille* and *Happy Aquarium*. What about all those players who loved those games and didn't want to play *FarmVille*? It seemed like a hole in the market. And it seemed that our team had a pretty good makeup to create the next generation social RPG. We had veterans from *Mafia Wars*, *Storm8*, and the traditional gaming industry.

The Making of *Crime City*
The development team of *Crime City* consisted of six engineers, a UI artist, two designers, a CEO, and a COO. It took eight months to get from the first line of code to launch. The core team consisted of three

How to Care for Your Monsters

Building a Successful Social Game by Combining Metrics with Emotion

From Casual to Social

What We Learned from a Shift to Social Games

Some games don't become instant hits right after launch. Such was the case with *Monster World*, a farming game developed by wooga and launched in April 2010. wooga is the third-largest developer of social games on Facebook. And *Monster World* is wooga's most successful title to date, growing virally and monetizing well with over 1.2 million daily active users.

With this in mind, I will describe some lessons learned during the development of the game. First we'll look at three topics related to metrics: engagement, virality, and monetization. Then we'll examine a number of other factors that go beyond the metrics. But be forewarned: As you gain insights into relevant key performance indicators, you will more than likely fall in love with at least one of wooga's monster characters.

Engagement

After its launch in April 2010, *Monster World* was not an immediate success, but we were able to enhance the game step by step. When you look at the post-launch growth chart, our release cycles become very visible. Every Tuesday we launch a new version of the game. And each enhancement can be seen in the growth curve of the game.

We began by improving features related to engagement, reasoning that without high user engagement, any enhancement to virality and monetization would be useless.

To measure the game's engagement, we tracked its one-, three-, and seven-day retention and its sticky factor (monthly active users divided by daily active users). Besides that, we dissected each step of the beginner's tutorial and observed how many users reached steps one, two and three, and how many finished the tutorial. By undertak-

On a snowy day in December, 2008, I was one of the four faithful souls that released *Bejeweled Blitz* onto the Facebook platform. We were the only ones in the office. We had no idea what we were doing or what would become of the game. In fact, we released it and promptly all went on vacation for the holidays. We didn't have a monetization model. We didn't have a robust or scalable set of servers. We didn't even have an "Invite Friends" button.

What a difference a couple of years can make in this space. *Bejeweled Blitz* has now been played by about 50 million players. The revenue generated from the game is a substantial portion of the overall PopCap business and is growing. The traffic generated by the game is higher than traffic on most of the major portals that we worked with

Focus on Social – *Crime City*

back-end engineers, three front-end engineers, a lead designer/producer, and a game-balance designer. In true startup fashion, everyone on the team wore multiple hats. We were doing our own IT. We were doing our own QA. I was doing production as well as design. We had no concept artists. And our COO was ordering our dinner every night.

The biggest challenge was the sheer size of the game. There were three major parts to the game, each of which could have been its own game on Facebook: There was the city-building portion in which players build up their town to make money; there was the single-player or PvE (Player versus Environment) portion of the game in which players rob and mug people in pre-generated environments; and there was the multi-player or PvP (Player versus Player) portion in which players fight other players. The key to meeting this challenge was prioritizing tasks to unblock people from working on other tasks. Back-end ended up moving a little more quickly than front-end due to the heavy UI requirements of Facebook games.

A portrait of one of our upcoming bosses which will force players to work cooperatively to beat.

After launch, we had our first concept artist pumping out building concepts. These concepts are then turned into 3D renders by our outsourcing partners and placed in the game.

On the art side, we made heavy use of outsourcing. Our art consisted of terrain tiles, buildings, characters, and items. However, it was quite painful to try to build the game with no concept artist. Knowing that it wouldn't seem right to use cartoon-ish art in a game about being a criminal, eventually we hired a few concept artists. They helped us give the game a more realistic look that would appeal to our predominantly-male audience—including buildings and items rendered in 3D.

Since the game never had a preproduction period and had no concept artists for such a long time, at launch our game had very little in the way of hand-drawn art. For example, we had only one character who gave you all of your goals. Soon after launch, however, we started populating many of the UI screens with other characters.

We also lacked a lot of tools, which is a common situation for many startups. For instance, our outsourcers didn't have proper viewing tools to scrutinize their work, so many of their assets came back with errors that we spent countless hours fixing. In addition, our map editor frequently erased the areas we were working on. We stored our tuning data in a Google doc spreadsheet which eventually ran into the limits of Google docs. We also didn't launch with great stat-tracking tools. We only really tracked the basic metrics associated with virality, retention, and monetization. We were taking our best guesses and doing numerous database queries to figure out how to increase our metrics. We were

pushing out features and not really tracking whether or not they improved our metrics. Only now are we starting to put a proper framework in place.

> The biggest challenge was the sheer size of the game. There were three major parts to the game, each of which could have been its own game on Facebook.

Building a Next-Generation Social RPG

Our goal was clear: to make a graphical version of the text-based RPGs. In order to keep from straying too far from the formula, we had

by Dan Chao;
lead designer, Funzio;
San Francisco

an analog for each part of the text-based RPG. As stated previously, there were three primary parts to the game. We had a home area where you could build income-producing customizable buildings. In addition, we had designer-created city areas where you could rob NPCs and buildings. We also had PvP where you could attack other players in their own hometowns. The PvP would be the social, competitive portion of the game.

Once we got all three parts working, there was one problem: The game was completely boring. The graphical nature had really brought everything to life, but it also showed us what the text had masked. We realized that the game's repetitiveness was readily apparent. In addition, players didn't know what to do. The genre was showing that it hadn't quite evolved.

To add direction, we decided to borrow from what traditional RPGs had always had: We added quests. We decided to call them goals to make the game more palatable for the non-geeks. First and foremost, it gave the player direction and purpose. It also allowed us to add a story for players who actually wanted to read it. It was a huge success. Even though the game was essentially the same, the goals provided a constant tutorial on what to do.

Today, having goals in an RPG like this seems pretty obvious, since it is one of those features that every social game has. But it wasn't immediately obvious at the time.

Today, having goals in an RPG like this seems pretty obvious, since it is one of those features that every social game has. But it wasn't immediately obvious at the time.

In an effort to make the game more strategic, we added separate resources and assigned them to specific actions:

› We gave diamonds for doing jobs. Diamonds were used to buy items with high defense. We assumed that if players were spending their time in the single-player portion of the game, they wanted to defend themselves from players attacking them.

› We gave respect for fighting other players. Respect provided items with high attack. Our thinking was that players who did a lot of PvP probably just wanted to attack others.

› We gave steel (our viral resource) for visiting friends. Steel was used to make build-

A portrait of one of our upcoming bosses.

ings. We figured virally gating the town building would offer a good opportunity for monetization.

Ultimately, we found that all of these resources overcomplicated the game and we ended up removing diamonds altogether.

Post-launch Learnings

After launch, we focused on the three stats that everyone focuses on: virality, monetization, retention. Since our average session length was pretty long, we didn't worry that much about engagement.

Almost immediately, we noticed that the amount of PvP was quite low. Our first guess was that the graphical nature of the game had changed the UI flow of fighting others. In text-based RPGs, players just visit a list and press a button to fight. In *Crime City*, players visit a

User Activity Breakdown
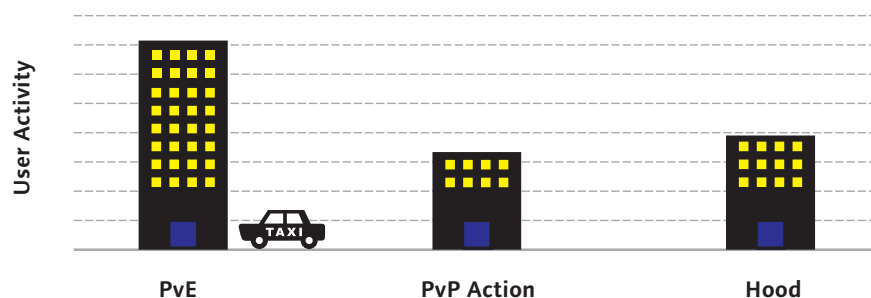
This shows the breakdown of user activity in *Crime City*. PvE is the most casual portion of the game, which has the player brainlessly clicking on jobs while using up energy. PvP is the competitive portion of the game which weights the player's friends and items against other players. The Hood is the city building portion of the game which provides steady income to fuel their PvE and PvP. The customizability of the hood also gives the player a form of expression.

Focus on Social - *Crime City*

list, click a button to visit their town, and then hunt around to find the rival player. Being in another player's town provided a much more immersive experience (because you could rob buildings and fight another player), but the overall experience was too cumbersome. To solve this, we implemented areas called arenas where players could find a bunch of rival players to fight. This instantly increased the number of fights.

Still, the number of fights was not where we wanted it to be. We looked at another place where we had deviated from the social RPG. Traditionally, social RPGs have energy and stamina. Energy is used for jobs or what we call the PvE portion of the game. Stamina is used for fighting other players or what we call the PvP portion of the game. We decided to combine them into energy to simplify things, but this ended up being a major mistake. We soon saw that PvP was abnormally low, which meant that people were not purchasing items. By simplifying this particular stat, we had lowered the amount of fighting, which in turn lowered the competition, which in turn low-

A shot of the boss feature in development. You have to cooperatively beat the boss with friends to receive some of the best items in the game. With this feature, we are highly incentivizing social play.

ered item purchases. We added stamina back into the game and instantly the number of fights went up.

Early on in the launch, we also saw that retention was not quite where we wanted it to be. By looking at reams of data to figure out where people were dropping off, we eventually found the culprit.

Here's a concepted background for the upcoming boss feature. The perspective is entirely different to accommodate the feature and give veteran players something that feels very different.

When fighting other players, your chance of success is based on your items and your mafia size (the number of friends you have invited to the game). We thought we would use a similar formula for the PvE portion of the game. We ran an A/B test—one with job failure, one without. From that test, we learned that without job failure, virality went down but retention went up significantly. So it was a no-brainer to remove job failure from the game. We realized it was important to keep the main portion of the game a pretty brainless click-fest with very few gates. Forcing players to have a large number of invited friends really limited our audience size.

The Future of *Crime City*

Every week we're adding more and more content for players. This includes new PvE areas, new goals, new limited edition items, and new buildings. We're also adding, refining, and removing features from *Crime City* every week. As our metrics tools become more and more refined, we'll be learning more and more about players. On a high level, we want to do a few things:

> Make PvP more competitive
> Make the game more social

We'll be adding things like a competitive ladder system to PvP that players can move

up and down. We'll be adding bosses which players can cooperatively beat over a week's time. Plus, there are a few other features brewing that we're still talking about.

We want to keep the game engaging and fun for players across the entire spectrum. We want to provide enough content and features for players without over-complicating the game for the first-time or casual user. PvP or cooperative play should ensure that there's enough dynamic content out there for players to consume while we continually generate the static PvE content.

Funzio will continue to support *Crime City* with new content and features moving forward. However, we're also eager to release our next projects, as these will benefit from what we've learned in *Crime City*. The next challenge will be to grow the company, move out of startup mode—and get to the point where we don't all have to do multiple jobs. ✳

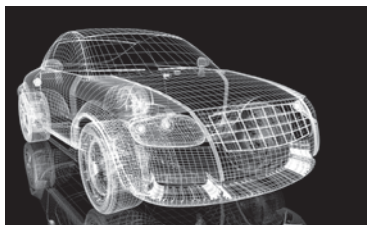# CREATIVE
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Focus on Social - *Monster World*

ing A/B tests, we enhanced specific steps of the tutorial to help as many users as possible enter progressively higher levels within the first session.

A/B test versions of the tutorial of the game. With lightbox on the top, without lightbox on the bottom.

In an A/B test, we send a percentage of our users to one version of the game—including a feature we intend to test—and the others enter a version of the game excluding this feature (the control group). By analyzing the relevant performance indicators afterwards, we are able to decide which of the tested versions to continue developing. These tests need to be undertaken simultaneously in order to keep outside factors (such as weather or Facebook downtimes) from influencing the results.

For example, we tested a version of the tutorial that forced the user to perform exactly the action the tutorial character Mr. Tentacle suggests. Meanwhile, other users saw a version that left the decision to follow directions open to them. In the latter, Mr. Tentacle is still visible and giving tips, but any action was voluntary.

The result was pretty surprising. We had always thought that users would prefer freedom of choice. But when we looked through the results, we discovered that users wanted to be guided. A lot more users got to the end of the tutorial when they were guided through it, so we selected that version for all users.

We don't add features to the game simply because someone thinks they're cool; they are added only if they are proven by metrics. A very good example is the "Monster Choose," which was initially the first screen in the game. Looking back at it today, I still think the screen looks quite nice. But after analyzing the numbers we had to acknowledge that we were losing too many users at this step. Surprisingly, there was no effect on user retention if users were not offered the opportunity to choose their monster anymore. So we cut the feature.

Because we had built quite a large user-base (already around 300,000 daily active us-

> We don't add features to the game simply because someone thinks they're cool; they are added only if they are proven by metrics.

ers at the time), we gained highly reliable data from A/B tests. Consequently, those tests became one of our favorite optimization instruments. Still, many tests do not show any result at all. A/B testing is great, but there are defi-

First view of the game for the first weeks. "Monster Choose" was one of the features cut because an A/B showed that a version without the choice worked better.

nitely limits to it. After all, 100 results of A/B tests put together will not create a great game. Sometimes we did not strictly follow the numbers, deciding instead to focus on the big picture.

Along with cutting and enhancing existing features, we added new ones aimed at raising our users' engagement—like adding in a missions system. When we gave users tasks to complete, they started to return to the game more often to fulfill the quests that were assigned to them.

After we had been working on the tutorial and the missions week after week, the game began to grow virally. The users' engagement was much higher than it was at the launch of the game, and we could move on by enhancing and developing virality features.

Virality

Viral channels on Facebook change frequently. They are not what they were a year ago, and a superficial look could lead you to the conclusion that developers are suffering from the changes Facebook has made. But if you look at these changes in more detail, you'll see that the changes were good from a user's perspective. And since Facebook and social game developers are both trying to engage and retain users, you would have to acknowledge that, ultimately, the changes were good for developers also.

More than a year ago, users were able to send out unlimited feedposts from the games they were playing. Many users considered the

by Stephanie Kaiser;
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Berlin, Germany

Every viral feature needs to be socially acceptable. Therefore, any interaction between users in a game needs to be both "share-worthy" and "click-worthy."

feedposts spam, which in turn created a negative image for social games. And unhappy users are not sticky.

Feedposts today are only shown to those users who have registered with the game. This change ensures that the content in the users' stream stays relevant. Relevance is *the* selection criteria in an always overloaded stream of news. With this change, feedposts turned from a viral to a retention feature. As a new viral channel, Facebook has changed the way requests are shown and implemented in the platform. User to user requests are now count-

When users click on a feedpost of their friends, they receive a gift.

ed and shown as a red number over the globe icon in the top Facebook menu bar. Requests can be sent to a user's entire friends list, including those who do not play the game yet. With these functionality changes, requests are a strong viral channel today.
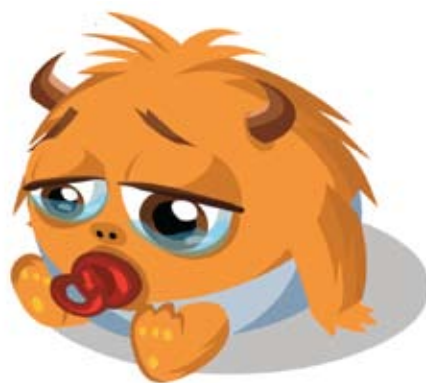
Every viral feature needs to be socially acceptable. Therefore, any interaction between users in a game needs to be both "share-worthy" and "click-worthy." If feedposts are share-worthy, users are more likely to share them within their social circles. They need to include a relevant message for the sender.

A good example is the Robert feedpost in *Monster World.* Robert is the customer robot standing at the gate to a user's garden, asking the user to sell a specific set of plants to him. He pays well. This creates the incentive for users to post a help inquiry to their friends. Any friend clicking this post is sending a plant to the user, who can now finish the deal with Robert faster, gain points and level up earlier. This post is, in that sense, share-worthy.

The counterpart of being share-worthy is being click-worthy—which relates to the receiver. Any clickable post that appears in a user's stream should be click-worthy. To generate this click-worthiness, we changed all of our posts to include an in-game reward for the receiver. Whenever the receiver clicks a feedpost, he gets a gift, such as coins, some XP, etc. With this change, our response rate on feedposts jumped up.

In addition to these changes, we introduced new features that were intended to impact the game's virality. One very successful example was the introduction of the monster baby. Users become more engaged with a game once they start to have a strong emotional attachment to the characters in the game. The sad, lost monster baby caused people to feel a certain need to help.

The baby would cry constantly until the user agreed to build the toy the baby was demanding. To build the toy, the user needed a certain quantity of varied materials. Those

materials could be found by harvesting plants (this is quite rare), by asking friends for help (through a feedpost) or by purchasing them. In that sense, the baby added a social barrier to the game. The number of feedposts being sent increased rapidly when the baby feature was launched. No one could stand to watch the baby crying.

After the first toy was completed, the baby would move into a user's garden and start living there. From then on, it would ask for food and love at least once a day. And if it didn't get what it wanted, it would start crying again. If users treat their baby well, however, they earn a daily bonus.

Recently we had a visitor at our wooga office in Berlin for a usability test. He was an avid player of *Monster World* and told us the game was part of his life. He had heard rumors that the baby would die if it weren't fed or hugged once a day. I personally love this rumor, although we would never let the baby die. Our *Monster World* is a very friendly one.

When Facebook changed the rules of their virality channels we switched from using feedposts to sending requests in order to use the full viral potential. Requests can be sent to all friends—not just the ones playing the game already—in order to invite new possible game users.

Focus on Social – *Monster World*

Monetization

After optimizing *Monster World* for maximum engagement and virality, we started to look further into the topic of monetization. By analyzing the number of buyers and their actual purchases, we discovered the obvious: consumables monetize much better than purely decorative items. They create a constant purchase cycle because they are used up as they are traded for game advantages.

In *Monster World,* one type of consumables is the magic wand. Magic wands can be used in the game to either revive plants or to skip over their growth time and harvest them immediately. In the real world, our magic wands would equal fertilizer. Today wooga is the biggest seller of virtual magic wands in the world.

After understanding the importance of consumables, we added another one to the game: woogoo. Just recently we have added a series of new features to the game that relate to woo-

> ## Consumables monetize much better than purely decorative items. They create a constant purchase cycle because they are used up as they are traded for game advantages.

goo. For example, we introduced Roberta, a character who has a constant demand for various products that cannot be manufactured without it. Users can gain woogoo by selling to Robert, by harvesting, by asking their friends (via requests) or by buying it.

The game's inherent woogoo supply is balanced to be below sufficient, but still the user has a chance to get woogoo without paying for it. It is just never enough. To fulfill all of

Different options to buy woogoo.

Roberta's demands or to use the auto-harvester, the user needs more woogoo than he finds by harvesting. He will always be able to sell some products to Roberta, but if he wants to sell more, he needs to either pay for it or accumulate it through interaction with others (virality).

Consumables in that sense either help the user to progress faster in the game or allow him to prolong the playing sessions.

Beyond the Metrics

As stated above, to enhance a game like *Monster World* you really need to know your metrics and need to analyze them on a daily basis. We are in the privileged position of being able to look into the KPIs of over 1.2 million users daily and we do. An in-house reporting tool, built by wooga, provides daily, automated reports that give us valuable insight into our games.

Aside from all the metrics, there is a whole universe of factors unrelated to metrics that have helped us to make *Monster World* a successful game.

USABILITY TESTING

From the very beginning of the development, we invited people outside of our project teams to participate in usability tests at wooga. My

first test on *Monster World* was done on a paper prototype, with a pen, which served as a mouse. I showed the prototype to possible users and asked them to use the pen and "click" as if it were a computer screen. The page behind the click would be the next step in the user flow and was also prepared as a paper prototype. By testing early and often, we tried to avoid conceptual mistakes at a very early stage—before we even began development.

During the development of click-prototypes, we started to test with real computers. Most of the time, we would just watch our test users. We have found that not answering their questions and not directing them helps us understand the current iteration's design flaws. The well known: "We listen to our users" is changed to "We look at our users."

We test our games every two weeks. Product staff is always in attendance. Right after a

wooga localizes games in seven languages.

test the "watchers" immediately discuss their findings and decide upon priorities for the next development cycle. We regularly invite everyone from the team to join a test. For developers and graphic people in particular, those sessions give very deep insight into the world of user behavior.

RELEASE CYCLES

We work in weekly release cycles using a mixture (or, as we say: the best) of Kanban and Scrum. Every Tuesday we release a new version of the game on Facebook. The next devel-

opment cycle begins on Tuesday and continues until that Friday. Over the weekend we refresh our minds and prepare to fix the bugs found in the new version that Monday.

These short release cycles are tough, and every team member must work in a very disciplined manner to avoid delays caused by inter-team dependencies... But it pays off. We move fast, but we are still flexible enough to change priorities on a daily basis. Once a feature is finished, we usually release it while still maintaining the weekly cycle on top of that. Therefore, if someone in the team has an idea (or a finding of a usability test) today, it can be included in the next version—if its priority is high enough. In my experience, this direct impact on a game really motivates everyone on the team.

LOCALIZATION

We localize our games in seven languages: English, Spanish, Italian, French, Portuguese, Turkish and German. From the early days of

Magic wands can be used in the game to either revive plants or to skip-over their growth time and harvest them immediately. Today wooga is the biggest seller of virtual magic wands in the world.

development onward, we have supported different languages in the game via XML. Supporting accents is as important as the solution to the problem that some languages just need more space than others. Consequently, no text is embedded in images. wooga offers localized

Robert the robot.

customer support, localized fan pages and virtual goods localized within the game. For example, during the soccer world championship last year, we had French, Italian and Spanish tricots hanging on washing lines in the game.

EMOTIONS

As stated previously, users will be more engaged in a game if they build relationships with its characters. We focus a lot on all the little details in the game that make *Monster World* very loveable. The robot in *Monster World* is called Robert. Robert stands in the user's garden waiting to make a deal. While he is waiting, he jumps rope, plays on his PSP, and flirts with Roberta. Users can visit their friends' gardens and invite Robert to enjoy a bottle of oil. If Robert has too much oil, he gets drunk and will pay the user's friend more coins in their next deal.

There are a variety of monsters in the Monster family, including the monster baby mentioned previously. Whenever we tested the baby with women in usability tests, they just went crazy when the baby appeared. Who can

resist the happiness that comes after building a brand new rocking horse for a baby?

THE TEAM

wooga is organized into dedicated game teams, with one product lead. All team members—developers, graphic designers, project managers and additional product managers—are dedicated resources, who work on just one game. Each team has an individual office room which establishes a concentrated working environment with very short communication distances.

wooga was lucky enough to find a group who are all committed to building the best products they can imagine. With the love and dedication of every single monster on our team, we have been able to work through the ongoing optimization process of our game and transform it into a real *Monster World*. ❈

Finally the baby is happy (thanks to the rocking horse).

Focus on Social - *Bejeweled Blitz*

on the original Java game ten years ago. By all measures, social games have been tremendously successful for the company.

If you look at the top five developers on Facebook, PopCap is the only company in that list that was part of the casual games industry five years ago. In fact, PopCap seems to be the only name in that list that was an established game company five years ago. I have often been asked how we were able to pull off the transformation from a casual game company to a social game company. The answer to that question is not simple. And quite honestly, we don't have it all figured out. But some of the key principles that have driven our growth into this space might help others find their way to success in the world of social gaming.

PRINCIPLE 1: It Is All About the Games

The industry tends to focus a lot on traffic

numbers to measure the success of a social game. Often new games launch, promotion turns on, and everyone glues themselves to the MAU and DAU charts. While watching those numbers is important, the real critical chart is engagement. Engagement measures those who play your game every day. If a game has high engagement, long-term traffic and monetization will follow. When it comes to engage-

ment, the important thing to remember is that people don't play a game day after day because they feel like they have to, or because the game keeps spamming them. People play a game every day because they love the game.

There can be a lot of noise and confusion when you first hop into the social games space. Terms like discovery, virality, monetization, and communication channels all get tossed around. But at the end of the day, long-term success in this space is driven by the same thing that has always created strong gaming businesses: making great games that people love to play.

PRINCIPLE 2: These Are Not Just Games—They Are Game Services

A few years ago our games were distributed as standalone content that players paid for upfront and enjoyed on their own without an ongoing connection with PopCap. Platforms such as PC download, Xbox LIVE Arcade, and feature phones all functioned this way.

But in the social game space, games are services—not discreetly packaged bundles of content. A social game team is really just getting started when the game first launches. These types of games require constant updates and connection with their players. In the case of both *Bejeweled Blitz* and *Zuma Blitz*, the teams evolving and growing the games after launch are larger than the teams

that originally built and launched the game.

PRINCIPLE 3: These Games Require a Different Approach to Design

We realized early on that, in order to succeed, our approach to designing games in the social space needed to be different from previous platforms:

> When it comes to engagement, the important thing to remember is that people play a game every day because they love the game.

SOCIAL INTERACTION

If a game in this space is not made better by social interaction, it will fail. Multiplayer gaming has been around for a long time, but social games are taking things in a new direction. The social relationships between Facebook users are based on real-world connections, not just games. This means that not everyone who uses Facebook is interested in gaming. Therefore it is critical that games enable players to both collaborate and compete with friends in creative ways that they feel good about. It is also important to give players complete clarity and control over the interactions that a game is encouraging them to have with their friends.

TIME-SLICED GAMING

Many players hop in and out of a social game as they participate in other social activities (posting status, viewing pictures, sending messages). Games in this space need to be something that players can use to fill in the cracks of time between other activities. Our

TEAMS GET BIGGER, CULTURES COLLIDE

In the good old days of simplicity, game teams at PopCap were pretty small. A three-to-five-person team that had the right balance of design, production, development, and artistic skills could work together for one or two years and make an amazing game. The original prototype stages of a social game can still work this way. But once a game enters full production, things change. Teams need to be supplemented with people who have strong service development skills—the types of folks who are wizards when it comes to things like the LAMP stack, Java services, and cloud-vs-self-host decisions. And as the game approaches launch, the team will need to grow further to include people with business operations skills—those who focus on challenges such as economy balancing, metrics integration, and CRM campaigns. Before you know it, your original team of three-to-five people will have quadrupled in size. And along with growth in numbers, the team will

first two social games (*Bejeweled Blitz* and *Zuma Blitz*) use the 60-second time mechanic to achieve this type of design. But there are many other options beyond just a straight timer for addressing this design challenge.

MONETIZATION

The shift towards games as services also means a shift towards ongoing revenue streams. The days of charging one upfront price for a fixed package of content are over. Moving towards virtual currencies and business models driven by micro-transactions

means deep thinking about topics such as economy balancing, player progression, and conversion moments. *Bejeweled Blitz* faced an interesting challenge a year after launch

> ## If a game in this space is not made better by social interaction, it will fail.

when we began designing the monetization system. We focused on introducing a currency-driven power-up system that was valuable enough for players to pay, but not overpowering to the point where free players would feel hopeless and therefore give up. These types of challenges will present themselves time and time again as you enter this new world of monetization.

PRINCIPLE 4: These Games Require a Different Approach to Development

Beyond just product design, social games require a very different approach to the development process both leading up to launch and, more importantly, after launch. Here are a few substantial differences that should be considered.

have a variety of skill-sets and cultures working within it.

The growth of the *Bejeweled Blitz* team has been an interesting challenge. What started out as a small experimental group of pioneers has turned into the biggest product team within all of PopCap. Daily stand-ups include designers working on core game mechanics, engineers building custom game services, and biz operations leads monitoring and tuning the coin economy. We have worked hard to maintain an entrepreneurial spirit and sense of autonomy and accountability within the team through this growth. It has been challenging at times. But through it all we have focused on building and empowering great teams that prioritize making a great game above all else.

Focus on Social – *Bejeweled Blitz*

GAMES ITERATE CONSTANTLY—
IN FRONT OF PLAYERS

PopCap has always believed in prototyping and iteration as the key methods to make great games. In the past, we have spent years iterating and polishing internally to find our way to a game that we are proud of that is ready to be put in front of players. Social games are different. Things move fast. It is still critically important to find an amazing core mechanic, but it does not make sense to spend two or three years building every aspect of a game before release. As long as the core of the game is great, additional features and systems can be added over time in the live environment.

Bejeweled Blitz is a great example of this approach. The core mechanic was in place at launch, but not much else. The game was a 60-second *Bejeweled* variant that carefully balanced luck and skill to create an engaging leader-board based competitive experience. But since launch, the game has

GAMES AS A SERVICE MEANS
"AT YOUR SERVICE"

The days of one-way communication between game developer and game player are over.

The industry transition to multi-platform connected game services is in its infancy. The most exciting changes are yet to come.

evolved in many ways. Core game features were added (star gems, blazing speed, and last hurrah). An entire monetization system was integrated (virtual currency, boosts, rare gems). And the game has expanded to three platforms (web, mobile, desktop). If we had waited for all of this work to be completed before releasing the game, we would probably still be waiting to launch. By focusing on the core mechanic for launch, we were able to quickly get the game in front of players and iterate in the right directions based on their response.

Game services require constant two-way communication. This means a deep understanding of player behaviors as well as a close connection between the team working on the game and the players that are consuming the content. This connection comes in the form of monitoring live game metrics, running fresh and creative community events, and focusing on best-of-breed customer service. It is critical that teams working on game services understand their players as well as how their game service is being consumed. This is the only way that iteration can be focused on evolving the game in the right direction.

Conclusion

We have learned a lot over the past couple of years as we have experimented and grown in the social space. We are light years ahead of where we started when we launched *Bejeweled Blitz* on that snowy December day in 2008. But we are far from having everything figured out. We are learning more by the day as we continue to launch new features for the games that are live as well as brand new games in the social space. The industry transition to multi-platform connected game services is in its infancy. The most exciting changes are yet to come. And there is no better way to learn in this space than through experience. So once you have a great game design in mind, the best path to take is to pull together a team of smart passionate people and dive in head first. Good luck! ❈

Bigpoint: Now in 4D!

COMPANY: Bigpoint, founded in 2002.

URL: www.bigpoint.com

OFFICES: HQ: Hamburg, Germany; offices in Berlin, San Francisco, Malta, São Paulo

EMPLOYEES: 600+

GAMES IN PORTFOLIO: specializes in development, publishing and aggregated distribution; over 65 online games bundled on games portal bigpoint.com

It only takes two or three minutes to realize that you would love to work with Bigpoint. (It's true. Watch this video *[http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_7XNKuacgks]* and you'll see what we mean.) Bigpoint is both publisher and developer as well as the force behind one of the most successful gaming portals in the world—facts which only begin to hint at what is going on there. So, in a quest to understand what makes the Bigpoint vibe possible, we talked to four different Bigpoint insiders. The result: a four-dimensional view of one of casual gaming's great success stories.

Heiko Hubertz, CEO

Bigpoint's CEO Heiko Hubertz has an important mission: conquer the US online game market. Having set up an office in San Francisco last year, he and his team are experiencing the thrill of starting up all over again.

With over 600 employees in the main Hamburg office and almost 100 in the new San Francisco office, Hubertz has made sure that new employees are hired on the same standards he once set up himself. "When I hire people, what's important to me is that they're on my wavelength and really fit with the rest of the team," Hubertz explains. "When people work so intensively together, they also have to understand each other on a personal level. So for me, social skills are among the most important traits one should have. It is also essential that they have experience. I always want to hire people who are better than me or better than their own boss. We need programmers who are better at programming then their CTO. We can only become better when the skills of our co-workers are greater than our own."

Having high expectations for others does not mean Hubertz himself is standing still. "From a leadership management perspective, it's important to remain an example for your colleagues," he says. "I try to arrive at the office early and leave late. I also try to be as honest, open and transparent with people as possible. I'm very straightforward and try to tell anyone what I think, even if it's ugly."

Hubertz has done his best to stay involved in the hiring process, but it's not easy. "I still have a decisive role for higher positions," he says. "That way, I can still carry the philosophy and vision of the company a bit further." Every month when Hubertz returns from his San Francisco office to Hamburg, he gives a presentation to all the new employees about why he founded the company and explains his vision. "We have to try to preserve the culture inside the company as long as possible. But when you grow to 700 employees and several subsidiaries, you will have to give up a part of that transparency, speed and culture. It just works that way, so the 'older' employees and I just have to accept that." Of the four other people with whom Hubertz founded Bigpoint, three are still deeply involved in the company eight years later. All of them have moved to San Francisco with Hubertz to manage the company's expansion into the US online market.

The American Way

"I've always dreamt of working in Silicon Valley," Hubertz admits. "If you are a real Internet entrepreneur, you want to work there. It was always my dream and now I just enjoy every moment of being there."

What also attracted Hubertz to permanently move over to the US to head Bigpoint's San Francisco office was the mentality he found there. "In Germany, it's about being careful and watching what happens," he says. "To fail or be defeated is considered something bad. But in the US it's a positive thing. A failure means that I went in deep, believed in something, I took a risk and was brave. But if you do that in Germany, you're considered a loser."

That openness to risk and failure has been liberating to Hubertz. "I can be much more innovative here," he admits. "Far more ideas come to me here, and I'm always engaged in a variety of activities. I really enjoy living in Silicon Valley."

Even as he embraces risk, there is nothing careless about Hubertz. After opening the San Francisco office in April of 2010, Bigpoint spent the first 12 months building a foundation for the US operation.

Heiko Hubertz
CEO

Sebastian "Buddy" Fleer
Producer

Jan-Michel Saaksmeier
Producer

Olliver Heins
Producer

Bigpoint

"We've spent an entire year preparing, studying the market, building up a network, finding the right workforce and building up our strength," he says. The product of that effort, *Battlestar Galactica Online*, recently went into open beta. "This year is all about getting out there. I want to become one of the market leaders in the US. I want to have the size and strength we have in Germany and Europe. That's my goal—and I won't return to Germany until we've achieved that."

Even though not all of his risks have paid off, Hubertz has no regrets. "We were one of the first in the West to adopt the micro-transaction business

When people work so intensively together, they also have to understand each other on a personal level. So for me, social skills are among the most important traits one should have.

model, and we were really successful with that," he says. "We also were one of the first to create television commercials for our games. We took the chance to turn a Hollywood franchise such as *Battlestar Galactica* into a high-quality online game with 3D stereoscopic technology. All these things are done because we want to be innovative. Not all of them work, but most of them do. That's what entrepreneurship is about."

Even the projects that did not go as planned have provided valuable learning for the firm. A case in point: *Poisonville*, a much-discussed MMO game with an urban crime theme. The game went live last summer, but by January it had been canceled. "We wanted to be the first to develop a full-fledged 3D browser game and made our own engine for it based on Java," says Hubertz. "We invested almost two million euros into it and spent two years developing it. But in the end, it wasn't as good as we thought."

Part of the problem was that Java did not live up to their expectations. "Java couldn't do what we wanted to develop," Hubertz admits. "So we went back to the drawing board." Bigpoint recently announced the re-launch of *Poisonville*—without the proprietary engine. "I believe things like this are part of the business," says Hubertz.

In spite of *Poisonville's* initial shortcomings, Bigpoint has learned a great deal from the effort. "Stupid people make mistakes and learn nothing from them," Hubertz says. "Smart people might make more mistakes, but they end up doing more things better. That's what we try to do. We faced a big defeat with *Poisonville*, but we used that to determine that Bigpoint shouldn't develop engines. We have to do what we're good at—and that's making games." The lessons learned from the project as a whole turned Hubertz into a true believer of the value of engines such as Unity, which is now used company-wide. "We're happy with the choice," he adds. "Just look at *Battlestar Galactica Online*."

Bigpoint in Brazil

Bigpoint recently took the plunge to expand its activities into South America, opening a small office in São Paulo, Brazil with six employees catering to one of Bigpoint's fastest growing markets. "I recently visited Brazil myself to have a look," Hubertz says. "I visited their local Internet cafes, talked with many game companies and tried to build an understanding of the Brazilian mar-
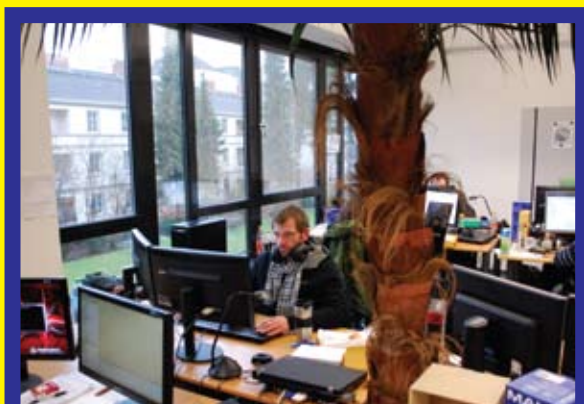
Each desk in the office of Bigpoint's community managers is equipped with a flag, turning the room into a Model United Nations session. Declaring the nationality of each team member, it also makes it easier for any outsider to look up the right person and country from the masses in the blink of an eye.

ket. After that, we quickly decided to open an office in São Paulo, starting with a PR and Marketing department."

Bigpoint is already preparing to adapt its existing Western and European games to the Brazilian market. "With that small team, we can keep an eye on what's happening over there," Hubertz argues. "The problem is that it's an emerging market with a low level infrastructure. People would rather buy prepaid cards to play at Internet cafes, for example, and they tend to pay for their Internet access in cash. Even so, I believe the Brazilian market is one of the fastest growing markets for Internet games."

Olliver Heins

Olliver Heins is a young producer in charge of Bigpoint's latest Unity-based racing game, *Toon Racer*. Heins joined Bigpoint as an intern in 2006—when the company had only 30 employees. "My time at Bigpoint as an intern didn't feel like an internship at all," Heins explains. After all, he was immediately put to work on game concepts and artwork for the games. Despite the full-time workload, Heins has a fond memory of those days: "It was a great atmosphere with not much pressure. We were a lot of young people having fun at our jobs. We had no idea that we would become as big as we are now."

In spite of its subsequent growth, Bigpoint has managed to maintain the family spirit of those early days. It starts with a commitment to make sure that everybody—new and "old" employees alike—feels at home at Bigpoint. The company hosts many parties, get-togethers and seasonal events. There's even a bar in Hamburg's famous Reeperbahn district that has so many Bigpoint employees visiting that it has become Bigpoint's unofficial "second office."

Dreamweek

In the summer of 2010, Bigpoint took its commitment to camaraderie to a whole new level with something it called "Dream Week," when the entire Bigpoint Hamburg office got together to develop two games in just one week. The catch: everyone had to take a different position than they normally have at the company. For that week, Heins became a 3D artist: "It was a cool way to get to know each other," he recalls. "Not only to get a different perspective on the kind of work that is done in this company, but also to meet people you would never meet on an everyday basis. My *Toon Racer* team works at one end of the building and some of them had never seen peo-

ple from the *Dark Orbit* team because they sit at the other end of the building. It was a chaotic week, but really funny."

The company's youthful spirit is an important part of maintaining Bigpoint's company culture. "We're a company with young people, and we like to party," Heins explains. "On the weekend we also run into each other enjoying Hamburg's nightlife—which serves for good conversation on Mondays in the office. Besides creating new friendships at work, it is important for the work that we do. It certainly helps in dealing with the pressure and the hard deadlines."

Finding Good People

Perhaps it isn't surprising, then, that Bigpoint has become a popular place to work, even for employees from outside of Germany. "We want to have more flexible people from different backgrounds with new ideas and perspectives," Heins tells us. "It's not that we can't find proper talent in Germany, but a lot of the local talent has the wrong impression of what kind of company Bigpoint is. A lot of them are passionate gamers who play games like *God of War* and *Mass Effect*. They want to be part of that side of the industry. Many of them think that browser games have limited capabilities, and so they prefer to work on the seemingly limitless possibilities of what next-gen consoles can offer. They prefer to work on high-end graphics,

Every Bigpoint employee that participated in Dreamweek signed a big poster that hangs in the office.

Bigpoint

complex 3D-models—to make something like the next *Final Fantasy*.

"In truth," he continues, "it is much more challenging to become a good 3D-artist at Bigpoint because you have to work with technical and creative constraints. At the same time, we are focusing much more on 3D projects and trying to push the envelope on what games can do both technically and creatively, which makes this work very interesting."

Finding good people to work with is no problem for Heins, however. He makes good use of his position within the company and his personal network to find talented artists to work with. "I have a good resource of talented artists that want to work for Bigpoint, and I am happy to be able to get them involved as my creative partners," he says. In Heins' dream team for *Toon Racer*, for example, five of the eight artists are mates from the university. "I even got to hire one of my teachers as Head of Art for another team at Bigpoint," he says.

Jan-Michel Saaksmeier

Jan-Michel Saaksmeier joined Bigpoint after one of his professors referred him to CEO Heiko Hubertz based on an Xbox project he completed with 49 other students at the university. Thanks to that introduction, Saaksmeier was allowed to start as a producer right after his graduation.

In October 2009, Bigpoint was on the verge of setting up its casual games department. While looking at old game projects that were still lying around, Jan-Michel found an old farm game and decided to try to resurrect it. Working with just two programmers and a graphic artist, Saaksmeier produced *Farmerama*, which became one of Bigpoint's biggest casual games. "That was the start of Bigpoint's social game department," Saaksmeier recalls. "Now our department has over 60 people working on six different games."

The original *Farmerama* game concept was a hardcore game in a farming scenario, so the team's first task was to make it casual. Originally, the game was intended merely to attract a casual audience to the Bigpoint portals—it was not meant to be monetized. "We can't say when the game was alpha or beta, because the game was in constant development," Saaksmeier says. "The big breakthrough was in February 2010, when marketing was on it for the first time and a press release was sent out."

Farmerama's popularity suddenly exploded. "That was a challenging period that required a lot of night shifts to fix the game's infrastructure because so many users were joining us." To add to the challenge, Saaksmeier's wife was at home in her final stage of pregnancy. "My wife was very brave," he says. "She knows this is the job I always wanted. She's also the biggest *Farmerama* fan there is. Whenever we have a bug or a problem, she is always the first one to notice and tell me."

Making Core Games More Casual

As a hardcore gamer himself, Saaksmeier believes that there are still many great mechanics and ideas in hardcore games that can be transferred to a more casual design. "We think that core games will become more casual and casual games will have more core features in the near future. They will develop in the same direction. So it's important to have great tutorials and usability in the former and really make sure there is great end-game content and stickiness in the latter."

Saaksmeier and his team have also done extensive research on the matter, concluding that some companies prefer to make games as simple as possible, expecting to swap players between games continuously. "We want to keep players in our games and have players remain with the same game," he explains. "Our stickiness is now even higher than that of *FarmVille*."

Though Bigpoint's social and casual games do not share a common currency, Saaksmeier confirms that the company aims to create a cross-gaming platform. "But we need more casual games in a solid state for that," he explains.

As a result of Bigpoint's growth, Saaksmeier's team now includes people of nine different nationalities. In spite of the differences in culture that may exist between them, the group remains very much a team. Consider, for example, that the team's latest project is *Zoomumba*, a casual game project they brought to beta in less than two months.

Sebastian "Buddy" Fleer

When producer Sebastian "Buddy" Fleer joined Bigpoint in the summer of 2009, he was put to work on *War of Titans*, a gladiator combat game that was nearing the end of development. Fleer was given

six weeks to finalize the game. "It was quite a hard time," Fleer recounts. "I had a new team that I had just met, and I had no real experience in developing browser games. But those six weeks went quite well actually."

In the months that followed, Fleer had several external production tasks within the company: working on licensed titles, creating iPhone apps for existing games, and performing basic production activities for various projects. The experience proved to be a good way to get to know the company and hundreds of new colleagues in a short period of time.

Fleer would later be asked to take over the role of producer on *Seafight*, Bigpoint's longest running flagship title. With a five- year anniversary celebration scheduled for March, 2011, Fleer and his team had to create a massive plan to breathe new life into the game in preparation for an equally massive celebration. "To be honest, at first it gave me a strange feeling in my stomach. I felt so much responsibility towards the company and towards the team that worked on it for so long," Fleer admits. "The project had evolved so much in the past five years, and I wanted to do something new with it."

The *Seafight* team was confident that the game needed to evolve even further, but the changes had

to be made delicately. One of Fleer's major challenges in this project was to maintain the game's original form and at the same time put some kind of evolution into it that would not push away the fans who had become involved in it throughout the years. The team set out to make a large list of new ideas and features they could implement: new enemies, new events, new quests and new maps. "We worked on those quite quickly, and we were able to implement a lot of changes in the first four weeks," Fleer recounts. "What surprised me was how quickly these changes were picked up in the community. Seeing how a community reacts so quickly to your creative decisions was a new experience for me."

Improving on Greatness

His initial success gave Fleer the confidence to pursue further changes in *Seafight* and to find ways to attract a new audience. The next step was to polish up *Seafight* even more by redesigning all of the game's monsters. Because of the game's age, the older enemies were single animated frames—which the team subsequently replaced with 3D animated ones. "This was one of the first major noticeable improvements," he says. "Plus we added a giant kraken."

Slowly but surely Fleer is making sure *Seafight* retains it popularity, stands the test of time and attracts new players. "Currently we are working on a new website for the game, which has been in development for quite a while," Fleer explains. "Besides running the game on new servers, we are working to ensure that the usability and user interface will attract new players." Fleer aims to have the new and improved *Seafight* running as an open beta within a few months.

Even though most of the 23 members of Fleer's team have been working on *Seafight* for only one or two years, the five-year anniversary celebration has reminded them all to maintain high respect for the game's legacy. "*Seafight* has a history here at Bigpoint," Fleer explains. "It is nearly impossible for anyone, new or veteran, to take a look at the game and have a complete overview of everything that makes this game."

Fleer is especially proud of his team's dynamic and morale. "These are not the kinds of developers that wait for a list of things to do, finish them and then go home. They want to be involved, pitch their own ideas and work hard to implement them into the game. I love them for that." ❇

Bigpoint Hamburg's super secret projects are hidden behind this door.

We are focusing much more on 3D projects and trying to push the envelope on what games can do both technically and creatively, which makes this work very interesting.

The Founders of GameDuell Share Their Views

Shaping the Games Market in 2011

Eight years ago, Kai Bolik, Michael Kalkowski, and Boris Wasmuth started GameDuell in Berlin. Today, GameDuell is one of the world's leading cross-platform communities for casual games. This interview provides a short overview of the latest developments at GameDuell and the trends the founders see for the games market in 2011.

GameDuell was founded in 2003. If you look back to the first days, what has changed since then and what is the key for a successful future?

Kai Bolik: After we had reached our first goal, becoming Germany's biggest games website, we have pushed the international growth. Today GameDuell is available in 7 languages and 9 countries. In addition, we are expanding strongly across different platforms. We serve 3 social and 4 mobile platforms now. Connecting these new business areas to the monetization on our own destination sites gives us a lot of leverage. Games are universal as a form of entertainment. Nevertheless, small differences decide whether a game will take off in a market or not. To this day, we focus on great user experience and monetization. This focus includes catering to local and platform differences and is one of the reasons for our international success.

How big is the challenge to offer your product on so many different platforms?

Boris Wasmuth: When you start off, you certainly have to adapt the games to the individual needs of each platform. But in the end, they are not so different. On GameDuell we have always focused on building a community around the games, a destination where people are united by a common passion for their favorite games and tournaments. Social networks have communities as well. However, they consist mainly of already existent relationships. This is a big advantage when it comes to playing games as people love to compete with their friends. Therefore, our classical tournament-

and competition-driven approach works really well on social platforms. The other way round, we have transferred innovations from our social business, like virtual items, successfully to our tournament platform.

> *"Companies with cross-promotion and cross-platform capabilities have a competitive advantage"*

How do you compare the process of developing games for social platforms and your own tournament platform?

Michael Kalkowski: Both platforms have one thing in common: we deliver games as a service. The development does not stop with launching a game. All things happen really quickly so we need to act and adapt in a very agile manner. Generally, we do a lot of market research and listen to our users as we develop and before we market our games on any platform. On social networks we have to consider more the external factors: what our competitors are doing and what changes and innovations Facebook is introducing literally the minute before we plan to launch a new game. We have learned that even greater flexibility and speed are needed to perform well on social platforms.

What are the biggest factors that will shape our industry in 2011?

Kai Bolik: As growth and marketing opportunities on social networks have normalized, we are seeing consolidation in the market. There is a shift towards focusing more on higher quality content and user retention on all platforms. Smaller companies have to seek
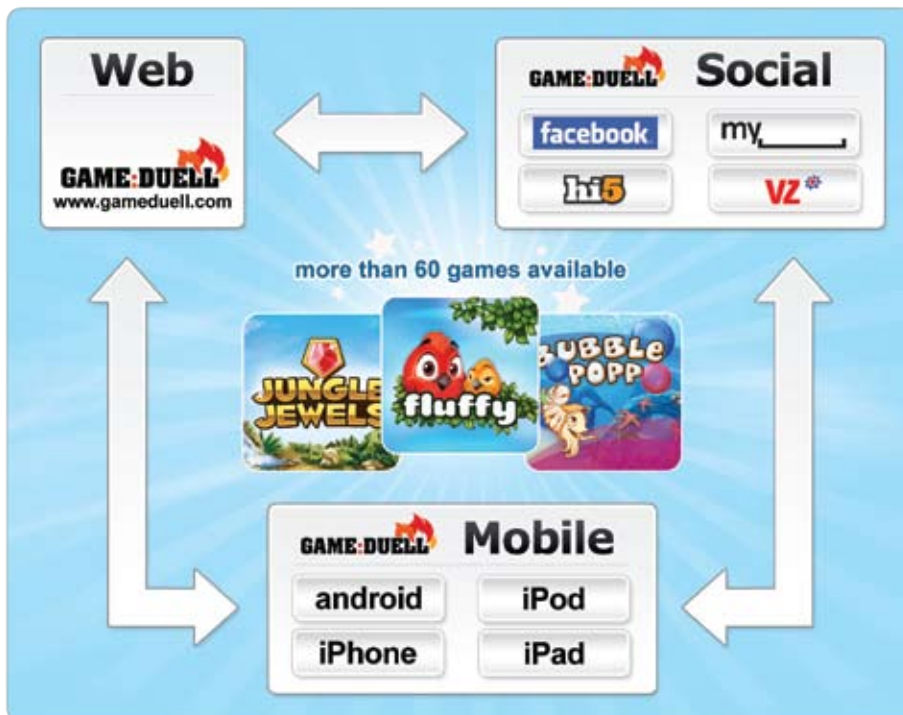
User Engagement Loop: Access across multiple platforms is relevant to the users

Bubble Speed on Android

Mobile seems to be the latest trend in games. You have published several mobile apps. How do you see the development in 2011?

Boris Wasmuth: The iPhone and of course the iPad will continue to be important game devices. However, there seems to be industry consensus that Android will be the #1 platform, not only in number of devices but also in number of apps and usage. Still, monetization on Android remains a challenge as there are still few proven concepts for earning significant money on the Android platform. Also complexity is higher as there will be at least four different Android stores very soon and a publisher has to fulfill the individual demands of each store.

Do you see Android as an opportunity for you?

Michael Kalkowski: As a leading games company it is important to offer our services on the most popular mobile platforms and right now, we assume that in the future, this will be Android. Android is definitely a great opportunity for us because our users are very connected nowadays. They want to increase their high scores on Jungle Jewels while waiting at the bus stop and they might want to harvest their tourist island (in Island Escape) while they are on the go. Technologies that enable this will be one of our main development areas this year.

alliances for user acquisition or concentrate on niche segments. Larger players, like GameDuell, with strong monetization, cross-promotion and cross-platform capabilities have a competitive advantage.

And taking it a little further, where do you see GameDuell in two years?

Kai Bolik: We strive to supply a better game experience to our community every single day. We want to stay on the forefront of social games across various platforms worldwide. This is a big challenge that we are ready to tackle. Therefore, we are constantly reaching out to partners, suppliers and new employees that want to join our team of more than 170 game enthusiasts on this great journey. ✳

One of the most popular games: Jungle Jewels

GAMEDUELL FACTS & NUMBERS

GameDuell Co-founders: Boris Wasmuth, Michael Kalkowski, Kai Bolik

• **Founded:**	**2003**
• **Customers:**	**More than 70 million registered members**
• **Traffic:**	**20 million unique visitors per month**
• **Team:**	**170 + employees and full-time contractors**
• **Games:**	**60+ casual games developed in house**
• **Marketing:**	**1.000+ partners, portals and sites**
• **Website:**	**www.gameduell.com**
• **International:**	**Available in 7 languages**

It's Good to Be King

An Interview with **Riccardo Zacconi,** Founder & CEO of King.com

Interviewed by David Nixon

I first met Riccardo Zacconi in London in May 2005. At the time, the company I was working with was growing rapidly and taking over casual game distribution businesses around the world. King.com was a successful "skill games" site and developer working with many of the same large portals in Europe that we worked with.

I was in London as a "content and portfolio expert" for meetings with distribution partners unrelated to King.com. However, I got to sit in a lunch meeting with Riccardo, his business partner Toby, and two of my superiors. I mostly kept my mouth shut.

My first impression of Riccardo was that he was one of the most centered, charismatic, and likable CEOs I'd ever had the pleasure to meet. (The Italian accent helped.)

The message from my company was pretty direct: "Stay away from our business or we will crush you! Let's be partners." I was a bit taken aback at that approach and thought, "Wow. That's aggressive. This could get ugly."

Riccardo and Toby stepped away from the table to privately huddle. They then returned with the following response: "While we very much appreciate that you are giving us the opportunity to concede early…." This phrase stuck with me as the most elegant verbal slap I have witnessed to date.

Since then, I have had a number of interactions with Riccardo at industry events and, though King.com has demonstrated a consistent ability to grow and profit while other entities faltered, he maintains a poised mix of confident leadership and approachable humility that should be the envy of executives the world over.

All of that was evident in a recent conversation:

Q&A

DAVID NIXON: So, let's talk some about your personal past. Can you tell me a bit about your history?

RICCARDO ZACCONI: I was born in Italy, grew up in Italy, and went to University in Rome where I studied Economics. Then after University, I took a job in Germany to start my professional career.

DN: Is it common in Europe to leave your birth country to start your professional career?

RZ: I'd say it's not so common. Most Italians like to stay home where the food is good. I think Rome is a very beautiful city, but it has not changed much in the past two thousand years. (laughs)

For me, it was clear that there were many more opportunities for me outside of Italy. I had a very interesting offer to start with a company in Germany. Since I also speak German, it seemed like a good choice. I worked in strategic consulting, first with L.E.K., and then almost seven years with BCG (Boston Consulting Group).

DN: How did you end up getting into the Internet content business?

RZ: In 1998, I met some guys who had sold an Internet agency called Spray to Razorfish for

50 percent of combined shares. They had developed some interesting products—community sites, a dating site, a search engine, and a games site.

In 1999, we decided to use these products under one roof and develop a portal called Spray. It was a very hot time for Internet companies back then. We launched in Sweden, Germany, France, Norway, Denmark and Italy, and acquired several companies as well. We had 800 employees and were planning an IPO in March of 2000 with a target valuation $2.5 billion. However, we missed the IPO window and ended up selling the portal to Lycos in September 2000.

I mention this particular part of my professional history because my relationships from Spray Network have continued. For example, our product architect at King.com was responsible for all products at Spray Network, and our CTO at King.com was the former CTO of Spray Network.

DN: So what did you do after the sale to Lycos?
RZ: I went to England and became an "Entrepreneur in Residence" at Benchmark Capital.

DN: Is that what it sounds like? Working with a big VC firm as an "expert entrepreneur," searching for your new business idea and getting paid to do so? That sounds like a fantastic job!
RZ: Indeed. It was a very good offer. At first, when Benchmark proposed this, I refused. Benchmark insisted that there was no obligation to fund businesses with them if I found good ones, but I didn't believe it. It just sounded too good to be true. Eventually they convinced me and I built some great relationships there.

DN: So what did you find at Benchmark?
RZ: In 2001, there were no paid online dating sites in Europe – only free ones. At Spray, we developed one of the first dating sites (spraydate, later rebranded into love@lycos).

We looked at several options to develop a paid dating service: starting one from scratch; buying several free ones and changing the business model; investing in an existing dating provider in order to roll out their product throughout Europe. We went for the third option. At the time, udate was the No. 3 premium online dating site in the world and was active in the US and the UK—but not in mainland Europe.

Benchmark proposed investing in udate and rolling it out across the EU in 2002. However, udate refused. But they did make me an offer to come on board, which I did. Five months later, udate was sold to Match.com.

DN: Is this connected to King.com as well?
RZ: Yes, in a couple of ways. First of all, I used the proceeds from the sale of udate to start King.com. Secondly, I found one of King.com's original angels (private investors) at this time—he was the former CEO and founder of udate.

> We had a deep understanding of the importance of community—from building customer engagement to engendering loyalty to sustaining longevity. In creating King.com, we had the idea of providing great game content to portals for free, rather than having them pay for it.

DN: What attracted you to games?
RZ: At this point, it was early 2003 and the big portals were paying quite a lot of money to put game content in their offerings. I knew how to create a B2C (Business to Consumer) Internet business, since at Spray we had also developed a games offering (which became "Games & Mobile" for Lycos). From our online dating background, we also had clear expertise on how to build barriers-to-entry and economies-of-scale.

We had a deep understanding of the importance of community—from building customer engagement to engendering loyalty to sustaining longevity. In creating King.com, we had the idea of providing great game content to portals for free, rather than having them pay for it.

Riccardo Zacconi

DN: I bet the portals liked that idea.

RZ: Yes. In fact, we were the first company that enabled players to play games with and against one another in a freemium environment, whereby revenues were generated via ads as well as tournament fees. Indeed, we created the category of "skill games" where our proprietary tournament technology matched players based on their ability or skill level within each particular game.

We leveraged what we had learned with udate, Spray and other experiences, and focused on building a portfolio of high-quality, free casual games. Of course, this was all a leap of faith, since there was absolutely no data whatsoever to support these assumptions at that time.

DN: It would seem your assumptions were correct. Was King.com an immediate success?

RZ: Actually, we just about went bust in December 2003. You see, we put in our own money and started the operations with about 10 people in early 2003. We launched the product in August 2003 and had an agreement with one of the investors that he would invest—but he didn't do so immediately. In fact, he didn't actually invest until the day before Christmas in 2003. It was a very stressful few months. Just as the signed investment agreement was coming in via fax, the fax machine *broke down*. I will never forget that day. We thought we might have to close our doors because of our broken fax machine.

We had already launched in the UK, Germany, and Sweden, and soon after the broken-fax machine incident, we were able to launch in Italy and France. The real momentum and liquidity started when we signed T-Online and Freenet in Germany as our first really big portal partners. The business grew rapidly and we reached profitability in January 2005. That was a very proud day. We have been profitable ever since.

DN: Tell us a bit about some of your other favorite moments.

RZ: I was quite proud when Yahoo decided to extend the games of King.com from Yahoo EU to the main Yahoo US site after reviewing our service engagement and monetization on Yahoo EU. That was quite a victory.

Also, I was quite proud when we were able to sell some shares of the company in 2005 for approximately $50 million. And, even more so, that we haven't needed to touch those cash reserves at all.

We created the category of "skill games" where our proprietary tournament technology matched players based on their ability or skill level within each particular game.

DN: What is your day-to-day job like with King.com?

RZ: My main responsibility as CEO is to find the best people, empower them with everything they need to do their jobs well, and then let them get on with it. I try to make myself very accessible to meet the needs of the team.

We expect a great deal from our employees, and we give them a high level of support. This philosophy has enabled us to run our business of almost 30 million MAUs, with more than 600 million games played per month globally, in 14 languages across the globe, with only about 125 employees.

DN: How do you go about making yourself accessible?

RZ: I travel a great deal between London and our offices in Stockholm, Hamburg, Milan and Los Angeles. Nothing really is more important in establishing accessibility than actually being there with your people. I reach out to ensure everyone has what they need to grow in the company and can express their ideas and concerns. Open communications are critical. I am very transparent about the company's operations.

You also need to foster an environment in which it is okay to bring in people who are smarter than you are. Finally, we have a very flat organization—there are not many layers of management.

Team photo, taken in King's technology office in Stockholm, Sweden from left to right: *Lars Markgren (Chief Technical Officer), Sebastian Knutsson (Chief Product Officer), Riccardo Zacconi (CEO)* and *Patrik Stymne (Chief System Architect).*

DN: What other responsibilities do you have?

RZ: In addition to setting the course of the company's strategic direction, I'm the one primarily responsible for site marketing and distribution partner relations. These are areas where I have strong expertise and contribute in a deeply meaningful way.

DN: What is your view on Facebook games?

RZ: We're already amongst the Top 10 in DAUs on Facebook, despite not launching our first game until February this year. We are now bringing our 200+ games to the Facebook platform. With over half of Facebook's users playing games, it's a valuable source of potential customers.

Our belief is that there continues to be an enormous opportunity to provide innovation and new game experiences on Facebook, and we will continue to focus our energies there—as well as on other platforms and devices.

DN: What do you think about the mandate that developers must use Facebook Credits to monetize the games?

RZ: Facebook Credits are very good. It is a simple and easy way for people to spend money on games. We have no issue with Facebook Credits.

DN: What about the 30 percent revenue share on transactions?

RZ: In casual games, a 30 percent revenue share is low compared to what we are used to! The channel's share in the casual games market outside of Facebook is considerably higher.

DN: What do you think about "freemium" monetization models?

RZ: There we have an advantage. Our business has always been based on a "freemium" model, so we have a great deal of experience with how that works and we know what consumers want.

DN: How about the iPad?

RZ: iPad, and more generally "tablets" (to include the new Android & BlackBerry devices) are changing the way that people surf and the way they interact with content. Facebook and

smartphones are also changing things, and these experiences all go hand-in-hand.

As Internet interactions move from the office to the living room to the road and beyond, these interactions will become more interconnected and social. Indeed, the casual games industry has been one of the first categories to evolve and address this opportunity.

This means that cross-platform functionality will become very important.

DN: How does cross-platform functionality factor into your vision of the future?

RZ: It is all interrelated. Our strategy is to develop high-quality casual social games that can be played with other people across all platforms and devices in an integrated approach, which means we allow users to play for credits and fun, whether on their mobile, tablet or computer—anywhere, anytime.

Our goal is to become the largest cross-platform games developer, providing a wide range of casual and social games that allow people to interact, connect, and compete.

In fact, King.com is already one of the largest games developers in the world, and one of the main drivers of our success is our own studio which creates consistent, record-breaking original games that top the best branded games on the market.

On King.com, eight of the top 10 games have been built in-house, accounting for 85 percent of the top 10 total game-plays. Our monetization model is a freemium model based on ads, micro-transactions and skill-based tournament fees (the latter dependent on platform, country and the user's skill level).

From January through April 2011, we've grown from 400 million to 600 million games played per month. And with the release of additional games based on our proprietary IP across multiple platforms, we expect these numbers to continue to explode.

DN: What advice would you offer a casual game development studio today about how they can be successful in the coming years?

RZ: Three things. First: Launch new games. This is critical. Second: Get social, and get community. Third: Join us. We're expanding rapidly in 2011 and will be looking to acquire talented studios to help us do so. ❈

by Ryan Weber; *co-founder & VP corp. strategy, W3i;* **Sartell, MN**

Top Ranking is Going to Cost You

Executing a Successful Burst Campaign

With more than 400,000 apps in the Apple App Store, it takes more than Apple's approval to get top ranking. One way to get noticed is to use "burst campaigns"—concentrating your advertising spends over a short period of time to boost your game's popularity. A case in point: *Dolphin Play* made its debut on December 21, 2010, as a free iPhone simulation game that monetizes by selling virtual currency to consumers. *Dolphin Play* ran three promotions in its first 90 days using burst campaigns and achieved a Top 25 Overall Free App Store ranking during each campaign.

Burst Campaigns

Apple's App Store ranks the top apps overall and by category, primarily based on their recent popularity or gross sales. You can generate significantly more downloads for your game by achieving a prominent ranking in the App Store's top charts. Because of this, many leading iOS game developers use burst campaigns to dramatically improve their App Store rankings.

Last year, W3i conducted a survey of 458 consumers owning an Android, BlackBerry, iPhone, or iPod touch device. Among other things, the survey revealed how consumers prefer to discover new apps for download. The preferred discovery methods ranked as follows:

1. Top 25 Overall
2. Categories
3. Featured – New
4. Featured – What's Hot
5. Search
6. Featured – Personalized Recommendations
7. Ads In Other Apps
8. Most Popular Topics

Burst Campaign Results

Dolphin Play achieved 937,115 installs in its first 90 days through the use of three burst campaigns—primarily utilizing pay-per-install advertising. (Our experience was that display advertising was not as effective for iOS app customer acquisition.) The first burst campaign came over the Christmas holiday; a second burst campaign occurred over an average weekend in January; and the third was during the Verizon iPhone launch weekend. In the three campaigns, we used a combination of four ad sources in which we offered an incentive for installing the app and four in which we did not. In addition, we ran campaigns on a cost-per-install basis within the W3i distribution network. The results were strong in each case, with incremental downloads (organic boost) ranging from 98 to 269 percent:

Burst 1 – Holiday promotion
› Bought Installs: 125,097
› Total Installs: 461,000
› Organic Boost: +269%

Burst 2 – Average weekend
› Bought Installs: 101,613
› Total Installs: 250,851
› Organic Boost: +147%

Burst 3 – Verizon iPhone Launch Weekend
› Bought Installs: 113,987
› Total Installs: 225,264
› Organic Boost: +98%

Keys to a Successful Burst Campaign

> *Focus on finding low-cost, high-volume, pre-dictable install distribution sources.* In our first burst campaign, our effective cost-per-install on non-incentivized sources was more than double that of incentivized sources. Consequently, we decreased the use of non-incentivized sources on our second and third campaigns and greatly improved our return on investment. Be sure to speak with the ad network to understand the volume it expects to deliver and hold it to specific dates for delivery.

> *Concentrate your initial burst campaign within a 24-hour period to achieve your peak ranking, and then continue spending on subsequent days to prolong your chart position.* To extend your burst campaign, you can spend less while still maintaining your position. For example, currently you need to achieve about 40,000 U.S. installs in a 24-hour period to break into the Top 25 Overall Free Apps in the App Store. Once you achieve this ranking, you can maintain a top 25 position with 15,000 to 20,000 daily U.S. installs—because for a typical game you will get an additional 15,000 to 20,000 installs organically. In the games we have promoted, we have seen that prolonging your burst campaign leads to at least an equal organic boost for each incremental install you purchase while maintaining chart position.

> *Since each geographic region has its own ranking calculation, focus your ad buy on a specific market.* In the U.S., you get no benefit from buying international installs and vice versa. You need to calibrate your spend to achieve the volume required for each region.

> *Do not under-spend.* The organic downloads from the App Store rankings begin to have a significant impact once you achieve a top 50 overall free app ranking. You'll get incrementally more as you climb the charts beyond the top 50. However, if you never crack the top 50 but only get close, you end up forfeiting a huge number of installs. The volume of installs required to meet your objectives can vary every day. If you work with an experienced ad network you can get guidance based on recent activity.

> *Images and app copy are essential.* You need a high-quality app icon, title, screenshot and a high rating for your game to achieve maximum results. Take the time to capture images and write copy that showcases the benefit of the app.

> *Be wary of increased ad costs during holidays and on other event weekends.* Because of increased competition, holiday and other event weekends tend not to be the best time to achieve a low cost-per-download through burst campaigns. There are significantly more users downloading games on Christmas day, for example. In addition, ad rates are higher, inventory is more difficult to lock-down, and the App Store rankings may become frozen at unexpected times (as has occurred during each of the past two years). If your app is explicitly tied to a special event or holiday, however, you may also see the reverse effect. For instance, we launched a new app calendar, *AppAllStar*, at the beginning of the Major League baseball season and saw a significant increase in installs for our ad spend. (This increase was coincidental and not in our marketing plan. Due to the name of the app, consumers associated it with baseball.)

> *You don't need to spend a fortune to get ranked.* Apple's ecosystem provides opportunities for reasonably-sized budgets to attract users and achieve prominence in the App Store. It's not easy to make a profit, but it is possible—and not simply a roll of the dice.

> *Quality and entertainment value have a major impact.* The number of downloads, user engagement, and revenue generated varies a lot from game to game and is affected significantly by how well your game resonates with consumers. Attractiveness and game mechanics also play a major role in engagement and purchase rates.
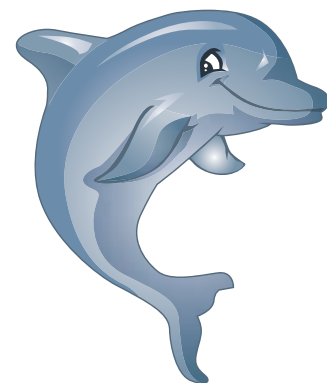
Given the high number of apps in the App Store, using advertising to increase installs is imperative to get top ranking and get discovered. And it's worth it: Organic traffic from top ranking is very profitable. ❖

Just What You're Looking For

Finding Success with Hidden Objects on the Apple App Store

Casual games are always changing, but the last few years have seen more platforms and challenges than ever before. Customers have shifted from PC downloads to Facebook to the App Store to Android in the space of just a couple of years; many companies have had difficulties trying to adapt their brands successfully across all platforms. Titles that flopped on one platform have flourished on others. This article will tell you my company's story and the decisions that took my game *Little Things* from rock bottom as a PC downloadable bomb to the top of the App Store charts.

The first image produced for Little Things before the "objects within objects" concept was decided on.

The Little Things in Life

Little Things is a unique hidden object title inspired by the hidden object books of old. While growing up, I was a huge fan of authors/illustrators who were able to produce detailed images. These included Richard Scarry and his *Busy World*, Martin Handford who developed *Where's Wally?* and Raymond Briggs, the author of *Fungus the Boogeyman*. When hidden object games appeared on the casual scene and were finding a receptive audience, I was immediately intrigued. I looked at the early titles such as *Mystery Case Files* and tried to imagine where the genre could go in the future. *Little Things* took over five years to develop from initial concept to final game, as I was working nine-to-five in a traditional game job. Eventually I bit the bullet and went full-time to work on my game. However, the hidden object genre changed massively over this period—while my core idea did not.

When I look back now, I consider *Little Things* to be the work of a crazy person. Why would anyone decide to take on a project that was 90 percent art and 10 percent programming?

Champagne on a Beer Budget

One of the questions I'm often asked is why I didn't choose to create a "Mystery Hidden Adventure Club" game. The bottom line is that KlickTock was started with zero cash and no external investment. The only person I knew willing to work for free on my labor

of love was… me. This financial constraint actually worked in my favor because it forced me to be innovative—particularly in the field of artwork. Since I had never actually worked on a project in an art position, I had to think very clearly about what the game would ultimately look like.

Early concept art of the title screen. The final version is much busier.

When I look back now, I consider *Little Things* to be the work of a crazy person. Why would anyone decide to take on a project that was 90 percent art and 10 percent programming? The images themselves are extremely detailed, with some scenes containing over a thousand objects to find. The majority of the work on *Little Things* was spent producing these patchworks.

The Launch

With the game near completion, I booked a ticket in July '09 to Casual Connect Seattle, where I took the game out to the casual publishers. Everyone who saw the game liked the title, but there were definitely raised eyebrows. "Is this too different?" Luckily for me, the portals took a chance on my unusual game.

Launch day. I'm sure I don't need to tell you that things did not go well: The core hidden object fans hated *Little Things*. Complaints ranged from eye pain and lack of story to genuine hatred of everything about the game. Unfortunately, the sales of the title were reflected by the early comments—"worst game of the year," as one player put it.

It was heartbreaking, as I felt *Little Things* was a great game. It had been crafted so that it could be enjoyed by new players and hardcore gamers alike. What I didn't realize at the time was that the casual portal crowd consisted of a special type of hardcore. If I'd chosen to partner with Big Fish for the release, I would have had access to focus groups and would have understood much earlier what needed to be done to appeal to that audience. In the years since the first *MCF*, interest in hidden object games had narrowed to a very focused, structured type of game-play. *Little Things* was just too *different*.

The Recovery

It took only a couple of weeks of crying to crawl back into the work chair and try to figure out what I was going to do next. The App Store had been launched, and already friends and colleagues had found financial success there. Firemint's *Flight Control*, written by CEO Rob Murray simply as an App Store test, was a smash success.

I was still keenly interested in hidden object games, and so eventually I decided to take a scrapped mini-game idea and adapt it to a full game. I tried to make the most action-packed hidden object game ever! Since *Super Search 60* leveraged the artwork from *Little Things*, I was able to hit the store with a complete game in under a month. *Doodle Find* built on the concepts with a popular art style and improvements to the game-play formula. Utilizing the fan base I'd built with *Super Search 60*, I was able to launch *Doodle Find* as the number one free app in several territories.

Inasmuch as the App Store had become a major force in gaming, the engine with which I'd developed *Little Things* had received an iPad and iPhone port. The iPad had just been released and seemed like a perfect fit for my ugly ducking HOG. Though

> I decided to take a scrapped mini-game idea and adapt it to a full game. I tried to make the most action-packed hidden object game ever!

the port itself was up and running quickly, I took the time to tailor *Little Things* to work perfectly as a touch screen game.

Launch Part Deux

I was very pessimistic about *Little Things* on iPad. The PC launch had shattered my confidence, and I was feeling that the slow-paced game-play would

by Matthew Hall;
CEO, KlickTock;
Edenhope, Australia
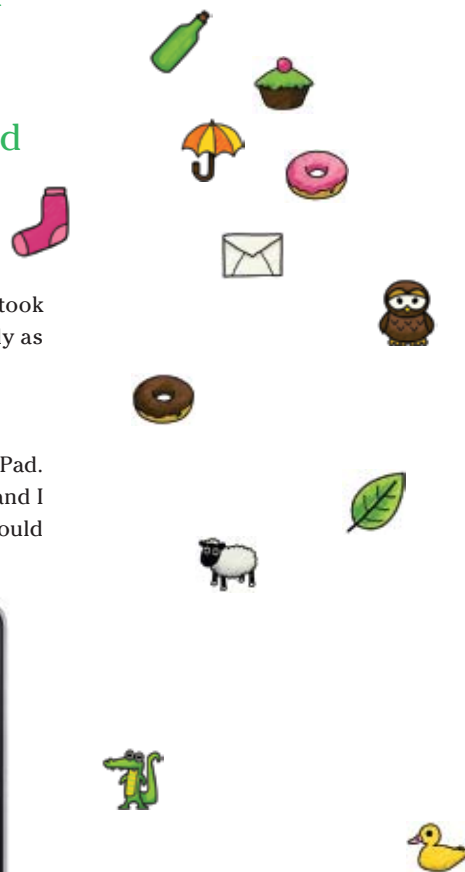
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not be accepted on the App Store. However, just a few days after submission, I was contacted by Apple for additional marketing materials. This was a very good sign.

And so, in early August 2010, *Little Things* launched as the iPad App of the Week. It reached number two in the US App Store and found similar success around the world. Most important to me were the warm reviews. Parents had bought the app for their kids but found they were playing it themselves. Others played well beyond completion, using it as a tool to unwind at the end of the day. Best of all, there have been many many requests for *Little Things 2*!

By the time you're reading this, the App will have crossed 100,000 downloads. It is regularly featured by Apple and has an excellent "tail," continuing to sell well nine months after release. Its little brother *Doodle Find* has now over 2,000,000 free downloads and is one of the most played hidden object games ever.

The Crystal Ball

I tried to predict the future while creating *Little Things*. I envisioned that hidden object games would become more creative and innovative. (Please remind me to throw out my crystal ball.) However, by trying to be different I ended up creating fresh and innovative titles which have inspired millions to discover the hidden object genre. *Pictureka*, *Where's Wally?* and *Little Things* are the three most popular hidden object games on the App Store, and all three failed to find footing in other casual marketplaces.

Apple and the App Store have created another golden age of the independent developer, enabling titles like *Tiny Wings*—developed by one man—to rake in half a million dollars in a month, based entirely on word of mouth. Not a day goes by that I'm not grateful for the second chance I've been given. ✣

The final patchwork takes many hours to assemble.

This butterfly never made it into *Little Things 1*. Maybe it will make a showing in the sequel?"

Now that we have your attention, Apar Games, operating out of Mumbai, India, is a specialist at conceptualizing and executing original IP and porting PC games in Social, Flash, Unity, iOS, Android, tablets and HTML5. Having worked with almost all the big names in the casual games industry we have credentials, experience and expertise to handle challenging projects and timelines. We have nothing to do with the image shown above. Thank you for your attention!

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Redmond, WA

Just Asking

An Interview with Amanda Fitch

To many in the indie dev community, Amanda Fitch is an inspiration. Amaranth Games is one of the oldest of the modern crop of small indie casual game developers, and it has served as a model for many other indies to follow. Almost single-handedly, Amanda has taken a classic RPG game design and built a sizeable community of loyal and dedicated fans to her *Aveyond* franchise. Which seemed as a good a reason as any to ask her a few questions.

–ed.

> It helps to be very enthusiastic about what you've created—and to be able to communicate why you are enthusiastic.

Can you tell us about your experience creating old-school RPGs? Why did you choose this as your focus for so many years? And what challenges did you face bringing them to a new audience?

AMANDA FITCH: I originally chose to create RPGs because it was a favorite genre of mine, and I found a great game engine that let me rapidly create this type of game. When I created my first commercial RPG and targeted the casual game portals, most were understandably hesitant to accept the game since the game was a risk. As far as I know, nothing like it had been launched for the casual audience before, and no one was sure whether the payout would be worth the effort to build and promote it. A few brave companies—ArcadeTown and Big Fish Games—took the first leap, and to everyone's surprise, the game hit both Top Five charts upon release and was well received by players. Once the industry saw that the game could make decent sales, relationships were much easier to build.

Amaranth is often used as an example of a "successful indie developer." In your mind, what makes a developer "indie"? And is the distinction useful or meaningful to you?

AF: The distinction of being an independent developer has its pros and cons. Independent development offers freedom, but it does not easily scale. Here are a few indications that you might be an independent developer:

> You work downtown in a building with 1000+ square feet, great views, and a latte machine a few steps away (Starbucks).
> Your office hours are 9 to 5 (PM to AM—because you have a day job).
> You make a consistent salary (game release month = enough to eat steak; every other month = enough to eat rice).
> You talk to your co-workers on a daily basis, face-to-face (via Skype).
> You have an official company address (it begins with P.O. Box).
> If sales have gone well, you will open an office in Seattle, Madrid, and London (with a three-month apartment rental in the city of choice).

Amaranth has grown a great deal since the days in which you developed games alone. Tell us a bit about that journey, and where you feel Amaranth is headed.

AF: It's been a wild ride. Managing and *embracing* growth wasn't easy for me. When you've controlled every aspect of game development for years, it's easy to forget that there are people out there who can take over some of your burdens and likely do a better job managing the elements you give them. The plan for the future is to make great games in a variety of genres with a great team of people.

Curse at Twilight

A Gypsy's Tale

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Aveyond **has been a key franchise for Amaranth, with half a dozen titles. Tell us about crafting that world, and developing it over time. What was the original concept for the world, and what has changed over the years?**

AF: I started out with a desire to create a game like *Final Fantasy 6.* I loved the uncomplicated 2D graphics, world design, and music for the game. I liked that the game had a long story and that I could play it for days. In the beginning, I wanted *Aveyond* to be a quaint fantasy land with dozens of interesting places to explore and fun mini-quests. In those early days, the art was a little rough, the music midis, and the keyboard was required for navigation. As the series has progressed, we've moved to mouse control, better graphics, and better music. We've also recently experimented with chapters.

The *Aveyond* franchise has always been critically acclaimed for deep, interesting stories. What aspects of the *Aveyond* storyline do you think have been most successful, and what lessons have you learned?

AF: The pauper-to-prince story has always been a favorite of mine, and this type of story fits well in the RPG realm where the protagonist is expected to change drastically by the end of the game. Odd personalities and humor are also paramount. With these two ingredients, you can create a lot of drama when characters interact with one another. An important lesson I've learned is that when I create characters, I have to assume that in their minds, they are doing the right thing, even if they are obviously evil or crazy. Before I write for these characters, I do my best to understand how they see the world.

How much has the reaction of your audience driven the way you have changed the franchise over time?

AF: After a game release, I watch how players react and take notes on what they like and don't like. There have been times when I planned to bring back a character in a new game, only to learn that players did not want to see the character return. Other characters I never intended to bring back have become surprisingly popular, so I've written entire series around them.

You have developed a very dedicated and vocal base of fans who love old school RPGs. How did you target this audience, and how do you keep them involved with your games?

AF: Most of my fan base has found my games through search engines after they purchased one of my games from a distribution channel. Because the games have huge maps, complex storylines, and likeable characters, players come to aveyond.com to get hints, debate about events in the game, and display their fan fiction and art. Between releases, I keep aveyond.com updated with new games that I think *Aveyond* enthusiasts will enjoy.

The current casual game genre seems to be very focused on a number of specific niches—such as downloadable adventure/hidden object games and social games. How do you find a place for your kind of games in this environment, and how do you compete?

AF: It helps to include in your game elements of what is currently popular and to target distribution channels which sell similar titles. When we first released *Aveyond,* cute 2D time-management games were the dominant genre. *Aveyond* had a similar look, so it was easy for us to interest time-management gamers in our products. If you have a new style of product, it is a risk for those who are going to spend time and money to promote your game. You also need to keep track of your games statistics and pass this information on to the people who are going to take the risk. And it helps to be very enthusiastic about what you've created—and to be able to communicate why you are enthusiastic.

By comparison, *A Gypsy's Tale* was more of a standard adventure/hidden object style game. Can you tell us about the challenges you faced moving to that genre? Have you been able to transition your fan base to that genre of games?

AF: *A Gypsy's Tale* was a great experiment, and I enjoyed creating it with my team. I love adventure games and HOGs, but I did not attempt this type of game for a long time because they cost a lot to make. Now that I've made one, I'm completely addicted. The most prominent challenge for me was setting up a design document for this sort of game. I tried writing one from beginning to end, but it didn't work. So I took a new approach. I picked out a popular HOG that was also one of my favorites and wrote a design document for it as I played it. When I finished, I was able to see carefully crafted patterns that I hadn't noticed while playing the game. I *knew* that I enjoyed the game, but until I had a blueprint in front of me, I didn't quite know why. Distributing the game was an adventure. I was positive that my fan base would *love A Gypsy's Tale.* It was fantasy-based, it had an enchanted maze, and it had a gold system for purchasing items. Why wouldn't *Aveyond* fans want this? When I released the game, I was shocked. Direct sales were dismal, but on distribution channels, the game was more successful than any RPG I'd made. ❋

Yummy Drink Factory

Once the industry saw that the game could make decent sales, relationships were much easier to build.

Grimm's Hatchery

Aveyond - Darkthrop

by Mary Kurek;
*professional networker,
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Atlantic Beach, NC

Game Art Gets Some Love

Forming the Union Between Artist and Fan

On Christmas morning last year, Neal Bauer experienced a kind of nostalgic nirvana. His wife gave him a Rockstar Games collectors' pack, which included some original artwork, along with a limited release *Red Dead Redemption* soundtrack, pressed on vinyl. While *Red Dead Redemption* isn't exactly an old game, Bauer's relationship with games and game art has a long and passionate history.

Bauer was like any other kid in the '70s who fell in love with games. His first love was Odyssey 300—until Atari and Colecovision came along. In his teens, puppy love took a serious turn when he and the game, *Dragon's Lair,* met and bonded. That's when Bauer made the decision to attend film and animation school. He headed to Edinboro University of Pennsylvania, a school fortunate enough to have the attention of legendary animator, Chuck Jones. Jones donated much of the school's equipment (procured from Warner Brothers Studios). Says Bauer, "We were able to learn on the same workstations where Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, the Road Runner, and Wile E. Coyote were created and animated." Extending his education in filmmaking at the University of Pittsburgh, Bauer found opportunities with Sony, Electronic Arts, and ImageBuilder Software, bringing him fully into an industry that returned his ardent affections.

Today Bauer presides over Bauer Graphics, with industry credits that have included Capcom, Microsoft, and, Nintendo, as well as some of the most notable sports companies in the world. But if you asked Bauer what he does, he most likely would identify himself as a champion for video games as an artistic medium—and as a collector of video game art.

Bauer the "collector" decorates his walls with a wide array of influential gaming art, ranging from Shinkiro & Akiman's *Capcom vs. SNK* artwork, Hiroshi Minagawa's *Final Fantasy Tactics* illustrations,


Bernal's giclée prints from *Parallaxium,* sold to fans at Comic-Con.

and Yoji Shinkawa and Ashley Wood's watercolor renditions of *Metal Gear Solid.* The collection even extends into game-inspired figurines, like the *King of Fighters Mai Shiranui* PVC piece sculpted by Takeshi Hamaskia, and an intricately detailed *Shadow of the Colossus* statue in the entry of his Oregon home.

Bauer, the "champion", hosts a popular weekly Double Plus Good Games Podcast, where he interviews talented artists like Terry Wolfinger (who created art for *Game Fan* magazine) and award-winning game designer Tim Schafer, from Double Fine Productions. *(The podcast can be found on iTunes at http://itunes.apple.com/us/podcast/good-games-double-plus-good/id376548440.)*

Promoting the Art Form

Bauer's interest in promoting great game art stems from a fascination with those who have broken boundaries in the industry. Explains Bauer: "I have a kind of reverence for artists like Team Ico for their work on *The Last Guardian, Ico,* and *Shadow of the Colossus.* Their contributions are setting the groundwork for establishing artistic credibility for this medium." Bauer continues, "When it relates to gaming, art fuels my experience. Be it story, design or image, I want to be engaged with something that captivates me and has the ability to change the way I think."

It seems that what Bauer feels is exactly what is intended. Rasmus Deguchi, an artist currently working on *The Last Guardian* for SCE's Team Ico, puts it this way: "As an artist, what you really want to do is transfer that crazy vision in your head onto the screen as closely as possible. With environment art, you want to help create places that make the player feel something, a sense of place, real or not. If we do our jobs right, we have games with the power to wow people and put them in places they'd otherwise
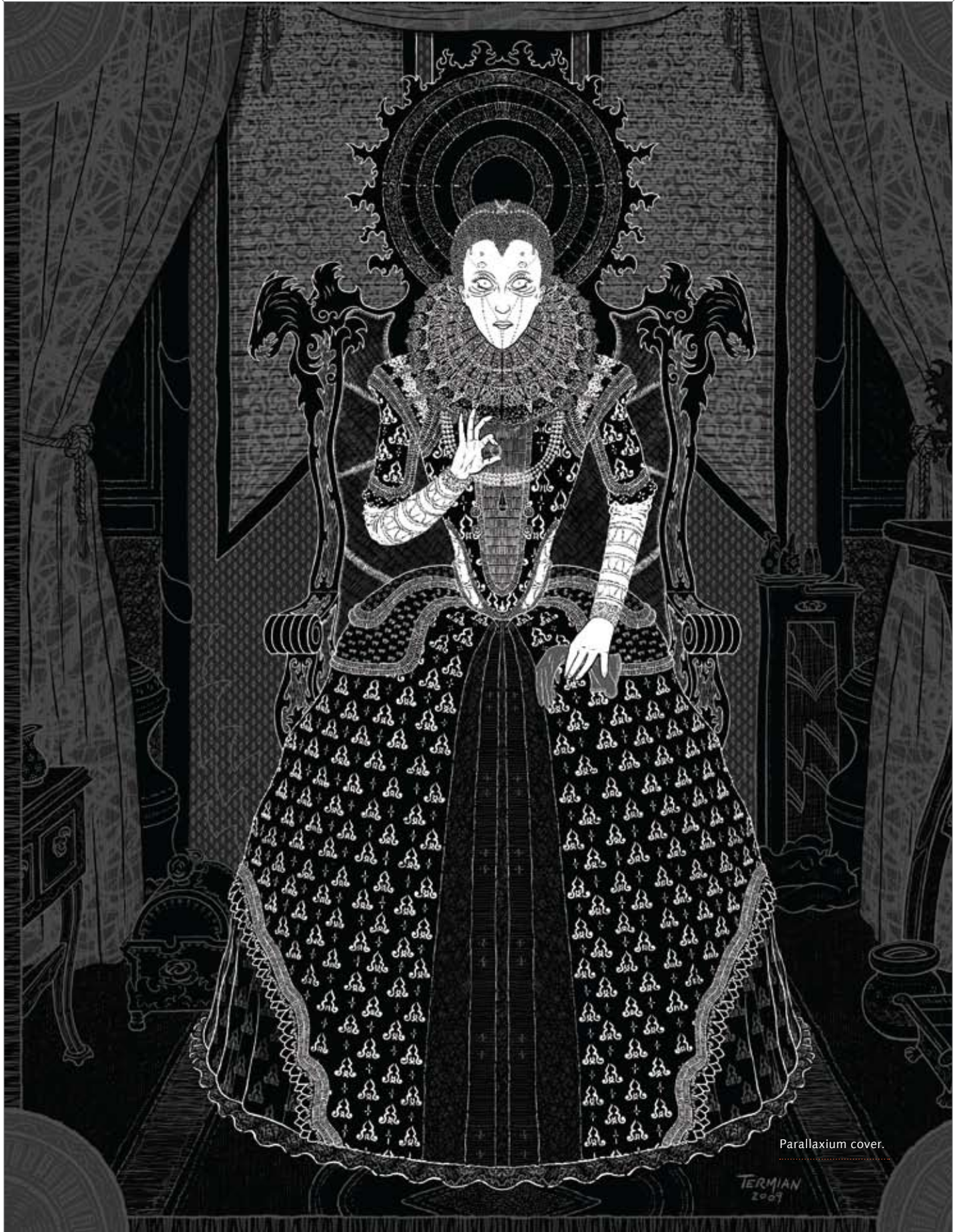
Parallaxium cover.

never see, letting them exercise and enjoy the freedom of really being there, in a way I think is truly unique to this medium."

The bond between artist and art lover is sincere and palpable. But it's a relationship made possible only through the intervention of a third party. For some time now, publishers have been awakening to the promotional power of visually-stimulating game art. Many are publishing limited edition releases of their games that include art books or numbered prints. Mainstream titles like *Resident Evil 4, Onimusha 4, Lost Planet* and several others have shipped with art cells. Titles such as *Persona 4, Call of Duty 4,* and *Metal Gear Solid 4* have shipped with art books featuring concept or promotional art and never-before-seen assets from the games. These are AAA releases that sell units in the millions.

Shortly before President Bush left office in 2008, Hall presented him with his painting depicting F102 Fighters of the Texas Air National Guard.

Reaching Out Beyond the Medium

Obviously, the marketing value of game-related art is significant to publishers, but how are the artists receiving that value directly from the fan? One answer is that artists are receiving their value from fans by producing projects *outside* of the industry.

Mark Bernal is an artist who has turned to producing his first graphic novel, *Parallaxium,* which is already published in English (with the French edition coming soon). The cover art for *Parallaxium* recently won acclaim when it was selected as a finalist in the 34th Annual Beverly Art Show in Chicago. The cover was displayed in the gallery from November through December 2010. *(A digital version of the novel is available at http://www.bernalmedia.com.)*

Don Malarkey, one of the stars of *Band of Brothers,* pointing out some of the historical details in Matt Hall's painting, *Brothers in Arms.*

Bernal started his career in 1994 as a game artist at Bungie Software, where he contributed to several AAA titles as a lead artist and art director. Heavily influenced by comic and fantasy art, it seemed a natural transition for Bernal, now President of Bernal Media, to venture into graphic novels as a means of connecting on a personal level with his audience of choice. Fans found Bernal at the 2010 Chicago Comic-Con, where they bought his giclée prints from *Parallaxium,* without knowing anything about the story in the novel. The art stood on its own.

Artist Edmund Dansart is also inspired by comic book art. His portfolio doesn't include game art, but it does include commercial art based on games. A member of The Art Center Co-op in Jacksonville, Florida, Dansart shows art in two of their gallery spaces. He also does commission work and has sold work online. Dansart knew that nostalgia would drive his market. "I started following several retro-gaming sites the last couple of years," he explains, "and replaying old NES games on my original or via emulator. First, it was daily sketches of various video game characters. Later on, I decided to do a series entitled '8-Bit Evil' in time for Halloween. The show consisted of paintings based on NES villains. I thought it would strike a chord with a certain niche of gamers around my age group. With the many sites devoted to retro gaming, I figured there would be a market for my art."

Dansart's hunch was spot-on. Though he concentrates more on smaller prints that sell more quickly, his larger works sell for around $1,000 (USD) each. "I have plans for doing mash-ups and comics related to retro-game characters on different platforms," says Dansart. "I also want to branch out and do screen printing, apparel, and toys." *(A short video shows a time-lapse progression of Dansart and a collaborator at work on a large mural of battling robots: http://vimeo.com/16483430.)*

Expanding the Market

No matter what type of art brings them together, the bond between artist and fan is intimate—which is why many game artists (who are so often removed from contact with the end user) are so appreciative when the connection actually happens. At Timbuk2 Studios (http://www.timbuk2studios.com), veteran artists and business partners, Jon Gregerson and Matt Hall, have found they have a particular talent that draws a powerfully loyal audience—a loyalty equally returned by Timbuk2.

Hall explains: "I think game art has always been appreciated by internal teams, but studios and marketing teams finally began to see the extended value of concept art as an economical way to sell a product—or at least to generate interest through a magazine article or a website. Reusing these illustrations became a means of generating needed buzz, causing the quality bar for these illustrations to be raised, as more and more artists' works were shown to the public. Many of these talented artists contribute work across multiple entertainment formats, including book illustration and comic book art. In my case, I've found a market for my art in the military print arena among collectors."

One should note that Hall's impressive credentials include commissioned work for the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, which may seem a bit odd considering that Hall's career began with

Warren Spector's *Epic Mickey* game.

projects designed to appeal to a less discerning audience. Both he and Gregerson started work in the mid-'90s at DreamWorks Interactive, with both eventually moving on to Electronic Arts. Over the course of their careers, they have contributed to such notable projects as *The Lost World: Jurassic Park, Goose Bumps, Clive Barker's Undying,* and the *Medal of Honor* series.

Gregerson (along with six others) formed a third-party game-development studio, Spark Unlimited, in 2002, providing a significant contribution to the original *Call of Duty* console game. Hall joined the Spark team shortly thereafter, and in 2008, the Gregerson-Hall partnership continued in the form of Timbuk2 Studios, where they have expanded their credits to include work in comics, film, and even commercial projects with companies like Marvel, Disney, Electronic Arts, LucasArts, and Big Fish.

Given its extensive work on military game projects, it's easy to see how Timbuk2's following in that community has grown. Gregerson has worked to solidify that bond by creating collaborative arrangements with companies that appeal to the same market. Valor Studios, well known for military artwork, is one such company. Hall was actually commissioned by Valor for a special piece, entitled "Brothers in Arms," which was presented to Prince Charles at his London residence in 2009. Just a year earlier, Hall was invited to the White House to present President George W. Bush with a painting of F-102 Fighters in the Texas Air National Guard.

Even with such extensive experience in the industry and a strong connection with a specific audience, Gregerson wishes for an easier way for game artists to reach fans. "Unfortunately," says, Gregerson, "really fantastic pre-production art is often collecting dust on back-up archives owned by publishers or developers. Game fans never get a chance to see it and enjoy the art in either print or digital form. Some of it does make its way out to the public in the form of free screen savers for PCs or mobile devices, but often it is not hi-resolution, and sometimes it is done in a way that devalues the art and the artists who created it."

"Periodically," continues Gregerson, "there will be a 'making of' book of popular games that will have a compilation of concept artwork or marketing art—which makes sense as a way to sell the art and get it out to fans. I think it would be possible to do much more with developing a true collectible market for game art that would be a win for copyright owners, artists, and fans. There are a lot of options that I think could be made available to consumers. You could have iPad compilations or high quality giclée prints, signed by team leads, on archival paper, canvas, or even metal. For 3D artists, 3D full-color holography is becoming more affordable for a consumer. Imagine being able to put a *Gears of War 3* monster on your wall in a way where the character would animate as you walk by the framed picture. It's not without challenges, but I think the fan interest is there. What is needed now is for some aggregators to begin to pull these collectibles together to make them available on one site in a way that can elevate the value, diversity of offerings, and quality of the collectibles."

Branching Out into Galleries

For some artists, though, the value of mainstreaming their work comes from a more "public" approach—like sharing their art in important gallery settings. Chinese artist Feng Mengbo's *Long March:*

Dansart's game-inspired art is shown regularly at The Art Center Co-op in Jacksonville, Florida.

Restart was on exhibit in early 2011 at the Museum of Modern Art in NYC. The actual game is featured on eight projectors, inviting players to interact.

Hollywood's Gnomon Gallery (http://www.gnomongallery.com) opened in 2008 for the single purpose of showcasing the art of the entertainment industry. Leonard Teo is the Gallery's Chief Marketing Officer. "Over the past couple years," says Teo, "we have done solo shows with renowned artists, such as Jordu Schell and Dylan Cole, as well as group shows with studios such as Blizzard, Blur, Naughty Dog, Santa Monica Studios *(God of War III)* and High Moon Studios *(Transformers: War for Cybertron).* What I've really been impressed with is how the entertainment art from film has crossed over to the games industry. Most of the top entertainment designers now work

High Moon Studios Concept Art Team - (from left to right) Jose Emroca Flores, James Daly III, Norwood Cole, Billy King and Aaron Limonick.

in both film and games. At the end of the day, art is art, no matter what medium it ends up in. The Gallery is another way of experiencing the art and celebrating it."

With an impressive 93 percent placement rating, Gnomon is known as much for its instructional facility as it is for its gallery. "It's really important to us to showcase the works of our students and alumni," says Teo, whose artists today work at studios such as Industrial Light and Magic, Sony Imageworks, Digital Domain, and Blizzard Entertainment. "Some of the most anticipated events of the year are when we celebrate the best work of our current students and recent graduates with the annual Student Gallery Show. But, as far as studios are concerned, much of the decision about whom we feature is based on what films or video games have been released and are popular with consumers. Gnomon also has great connections within the industry, since many top professionals either instruct classes at the Gnomon School of Visual Effects or contribute to our Gnomon Workshop DVDs, so we work a lot within and through that network."

Given the current state of the economy, you might expect there would have to be some commercialism involved in order to keep Gnomon Gallery thriving, but all events at the gallery are free and open to the public, with music, food, and attendance by the artists themselves. Their openings typically attract around 200 people. "A piece doesn't have to be 'highbrow' art, or hanging in the LACMA to be good, beautiful, and successful art," says Teo. "That's something we really want to showcase at the gallery—the beauty of an art form you don't typically see hanging on gallery walls."

Take the same idea of bringing fans and artists face-to-face, but add an Asian-American pop culture magazine as host, and you've got Game Over, an annual exhibit of video-game-inspired art sponsored by Giant Robot (http://www.giantrobot.com). Stores and galleries owned by Giant Robot in Los Angeles and San Francisco offer a wide variety of art-emblazoned accessories and display items for sale.

Giving Collectors Their Due

Lance Corporal Rick Williams has spent years collecting tee-shirts bearing art from *Halo* and *Dragon Age* games, *World of Warcraft, God of War,* and *League of Legends.* While he covets the art, Williams knows little of the artists, themselves—a common situation that should provide a hint to marketers who may have miscalculated the value of promoting artists along with art and game. Williams, a twenty-one year old Marine, has been playing games since his initial encounter with *Battletoads* on Nintendo. Now he plays his favorite RPG and MMOs on PS3, Xbox 360, and PC, and what he says optimizes the experience is really good art. "The art, especially 3D, makes the

storylines more realistic," says Williams. "With some games, the art is so good that it can pull you outside of normal play, where you are not just shooting creatures and moving on to the next. You get involved in what's happening." That sense of involvement is so powerful that it has inspired Williams to dive into a software and art program in the fall.

Most fans are like Williams: enamored of the rich experience provided by nameless artists. But then there are collectors who have immersed themselves in the industry, rising to the forefront to educate the public, pulling everything game-related under the art umbrella. Chris Melissinos is a collector and expert who is also curator of an exhibit called "The Art of Video Games" which is coming to the Smithsonian in March, 2012. His personal collection includes more than forty systems, hundreds of games, and artifacts. Though Melissinos spends his days as Vice President of Corporate Marketing for Verisign, it's his history as Chief Gaming Officer and Chief Evangelist at Sun Microsystems which likely built the reputation that keeps him on the speaking roster at industry conferences.

Bringing Game Art Full Circle

It seems only fitting—with all of these museums and galleries finally showing off game art—that our own industry conferences would step up. After all, they too attract some of the most insatiable fans in the industry: game developers themselves. As it happens, Timbuk2 partner, Matt Hall, is a juror for E3's "Into the Pixel" art show. Says Hall: "The show gives enthusiasts a chance to see a variety of the beautiful works that inspire or influence the look of the latest games. It also gives artists and illustrators an opportunity to showcase their works outside the context of production and allows the art to stand on its own artistic merit."

Art is so personal that it's understandable why there's a mere thread between an art lover and its creator. The feelings evoked last for years—maybe a lifetime—which means the relationship lasts equally long. As Jeanette Winterson wrote it in her November 2002 piece on why art matters: "Art is a continuum, passed down from hand to hand, lost, rediscovered, found in objects as proof of a living

Clockwise from upper left to right:
Shadow of the whale (MOH) - Depiction of one of the Sniper levels for the latest *Medal of Honor*; Main character design for a *Dark Age* game that was being worked on at Midway Studios.; A line-up of potential characters for a period based Dark Age game done for Midway Studios; Paintover of some level geometry done for *Blacksite: Area 51*; Allied Assault Poster (MOH) – An image Matt Hall did for the original *Medal of Honor: Allied Assault* game.

spirit that defies the orthodoxy of materialism. Yes, art becomes a collector's item, or a rich man's trophy. Yes, art is traded for large sums of money, but this is not art's purpose, nor its nature. If money ceased to exist, art would continue. If war flattened London tomorrow, someone would start to make an installation out of the rubble."

Art provides a flawless union between creator and consumer—one that is complete the moment it is acknowledged. ❊

Game Development on the High Seas

The Evolution of *Tradewinds*

Sandlot Games is known for a number of strong and popular franchises, most of all *Cake Mania*. However, few game franchises are as different from the traditional notion of what a "casual game" is supposed to be than *Tradewinds*, our second-most-popular game series, is. The game's long evolution through many versions on many different platforms is a reflection of the evolving casual game audience and their play habits. *Tradewinds* has had over 15 different releases across half a dozen platforms since it launched in 2004. The five main games in the series have been downloaded over 50 million times. The mobile versions of the game have been purchased hundreds of thousands of times on many different devices. For all of its successes, *Tradewinds* has also suffered some setbacks that occurred when we were slow to react to customer trends and shifting consumer behavior.

At its heart, *Tradewinds* is a trading game in which you attempt to buy low and sell high in ports that you visit. The danger comes in a variety of forms, whether it's from high seas combat or trading in contraband. *Tradewinds* appeals to a slightly more male and younger demographic than the traditional casual game.

Tradewinds 1

We released *Tradewinds* in 2004, when the company was still in its infancy. At the time, we were publishing our first five games through WildTangent and working out of the spare bedroom in my house. In the age of *Bejeweled* and match-three dominance, we were not satisfied with the axiom that casual gamers only enjoyed one type of game. Since our lead programmer and I both played *Taipan* as children and had always wanted to give new life to this very addictive game mechanic, we quickly set out

to build what we originally referred to as *Floating Empire.*

It took longer for our three-person team to build *Tradewinds 1* than our previous three projects combined. The original *Tradewinds* was set in 19th century Far East and did not have the classic task-based game-play for which the series is renowned. However, we included a tiny RPG element that enabled you to choose one of four characters when starting out and that modified your stats and your complement of ships. In Port Authority you would collect bounties from sinking pirates and you could add multiple ships to your fleet.

Tradewinds 1

When it launched, *Tradewinds* quickly became a top game on a number of websites (including Yahoo Games) and on the WildGames platform (through HP and Compaq, and other OEMs). Around the same time, we contacted Astraware about putting *Tradewinds* on Palm and Pocket PC. The game did very well on those platforms, resonating with the tech-savvy crowd.

Tradewinds 2

Tradewinds 2 was launched almost a year later, in 2005. The game introduced a task-based game mechanic, breaking ground with the humorous dialogue and the adventure for which the series has come to be known. Players relished the light adventure aspect of *Tradewinds 2*, and our user-base began to broaden. *Tradewinds 2* moved to the seas of the Caribbean, and while you could only be captain to one ship, it could be more customizable with weapons and special items. The introduction of non-cargo inventory provided fantastic variety in game-play as well as satisfying combat.

Tradewinds 2

To this day, *Tradewinds 2* is the most successful downloadable game in the franchise, with over 300,000 copies sold. Its success has been replicated on handheld, BREW/J2ME and iPhone platforms and has been an inspiration for a variety of other casual and social games that have been released through the years.

We did hear one complaint: Hardcore fans of the series bemoaned the loss of fleets in *Tradewinds 2*. We addressed that issue when we released *Tradewinds Legends* later that year.

Tradewinds Legends

Other *Tradewinds* Sequels

Tradewinds Legends came out in December of 2005. This time the setting was changed to a mystical Middle East. The fleets were back, plus we added flying ships and magic combat. *Tradewinds Legends* has since been released on iPad and continues to be the most beloved game by hardcore fans of the series.

Tradewinds Legends showed that a simple re-skin, combined with the addition of a few new core features, would succeed well in continuing the hot trend of an existing franchise. Since there was no real competition to *Tradewinds*, this new sequel only helped bolster the franchise's popularity.

Tradewinds Caravans, the fourth game in the series, launched in 2008. This new game was an over-


Tradewinds Caravans

land version of *Tradewinds*, where you would move large armies over the path of the Silk Road, introducing more RTS elements into the game. In addition to the trading and fighting, the game added exploration on the travel map. We had greatly expanded the game's features and footprint, but the resultant game did not inspire our audience.

The process of shuttling troops across the desert and the more hardcore-style RTS combat system were not very well accepted by casual gamers—and since you do quite a bit of travel in *Tradewinds*, these features tended to turn off a lot of first-time players as well. On the other hand, *Tradewinds Caravans* was the most ambitious of all the *Tradewind*s games and showed that we could pull off a more complicated game in the *Tradewinds* universe.

Undaunted, we released a new version of *Tradewinds* into the downloadable channel in 2009. This version reprised fleet style combat with magic and inventory, making it a very similar experience to *Tradewinds Legends*—but this time occurring in the Greek Myths, replete with sea monster encounters. To date, this has been our least successful *Tradewinds* game. It was when *Tradewinds Odyssey*

by Daniel Bernstein;
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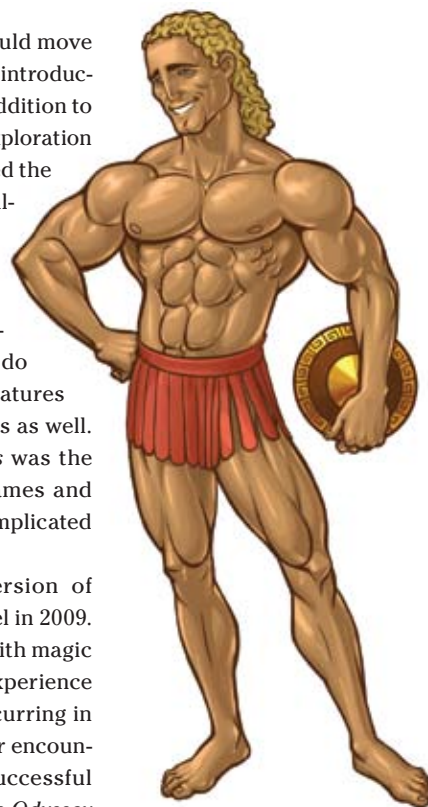
came out that we decided to rethink our *Tradewinds* strategy.

Tradewinds Online

In 2007, we decided to embark on the difficult journey of building out a massively multiplayer version of *Tradewinds* while simultaneously working on downloadable versions of the game. We built out an engine on top of Torque 3D that allowed us to have a top down view of large tile-sets suitable for real-time-strategy gaming. I needed to spread the risk of development across multiple projects, so the original *Tradewinds Online* engine became the basis for *Westward 2* and the three subsequent *Westward* sequels. Unfortunately, by the time *Tradewinds Odyssey* came

Tradewinds Odyssey

out it was clear that the MMO universe was starting to contract as more users were moving toward playing Flash based games on social networks. The idea for *Tradewinds Facebook* was our answer to this challenge.

We started developing a version of *Tradewinds* for Facebook in 2010. The original design was modified twice during the development process as we learned more and more about how to develop games for this new medium. Although originally we used a *Mob Wars*-style game design, we decided to turn to a more immersive, task-based exploration system that had social elements integrated into every phase of the game, from exploration to trading to combat.

The end product was designed from the ground up to be a social game. While *Tradewinds Facebook* retains many features of the original game, we did not want to simply port a casual game to this new platform. Every trade in *Tradewinds Facebook* is profitable, and every sale makes use of a sale timer. We also introduced port limits on goods to be sold. Thus, trading became our main in-game grinding/farming mechanic with the continued interest in the game maintained by exploration, collections, tasks and combat. In addition, we introduce maps and new tasks constantly. As we add new features,

we also generate unique quests that make use of those new features. Finally, all features work holistically in that the quest system is flexible enough to accommodate all of the player's actions in the game, from finding pirate hats to trading tea to inviting friends to play.

Tradewinds Facebook

Lessons Learned

To evolve a franchise, especially a popular (yet niche) franchise such as *Tradewinds*, it is important to look at customer trends. There was a shift away from strategy games such as *Tradewinds* in downloadable games from 2008 onward as the target demographic for the game started moving away from downloads. The downloadable casual games industry consolidated around the 50+ female user, and the most popular game genres reflected that demographic shift. Moreover, there was a lot of franchise fatigue as people were satisfied with three to four games in the *Tradewinds* series.

On the other hand, a great number of our players were on social networks such as Facebook, and that created an opportunity for us to present the game to a much wider audience. Early indications on *Tradewinds Facebook* are very positive—showing that we have breathed new life into this venerable franchise. We're excited to evolve *Tradewinds* into new platforms and thrive on the new opportunities and challenges presented by each one.

Lastly, building *Tradewind*s has shown that a simple game dynamic can have longevity through the complementary addition of worlds and stories that create meaningful experiences for the end user. We have touched and entertained millions of players through the years with drama (and comedy) on the high seas. And this adventure is only the beginning. ✖

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Battle of the Brands

Breaking Down the Doors to Facebook

#	Game	Users
1.	CityVille *Zynga*	19.6 Million (DAUs)
2.	FarmVille *Zynga*	10.6 Million
3.	Empires & Allies *Zynga*	7.7 Million
4.	Texas HoldEm Poker *Zynga*	7.1 Million
5.	FrontierVille *Zynga*	4 Million
6.	Bejeweled Blitz *PopCap*	3.3 Million
7.	Cafe World *Zynga*	2.8 Million
8.	Gardens of Time *Playdom*	2.7 Million
9.	Games *GSN*	1.8 Million
10.	Bubble Island *wooga*	1.7 Million

Q: What's missing from this top ten Facebook games list?

A: Classic game brands.

No famous board game, game show, or even classic arcade brand is in the top ten. If we expand the definition to include well-known casual games, only PopCap's *Bejeweled Blitz* makes the list. And it's not like the big boys aren't trying. Over two years after the launch of *Mafia Wars*, social games are undeniably the dominant force in the casual space, with branded games still struggling to take advantage of the Facebook phenomenon.

So, do brands matter on Facebook? They do. They come prepackaged with a recipe for success, including brand trust, high production values, and built-in audiences through multimedia tie-ins. Let's also acknowledge that Facebook absolutely matters to brands. Classic, casual, hardcore, even owners of intellectual property (IP) that wouldn't necessarily be associated with online games want to play. Facebook has become the new Mecca for online games. Let's face it: You can't ignore 500 million Daily Active Users (DAUs).

So what's the holdup? The sticking point is the need to bring brands to the social platform in ways that work for all involved, including the players. We know the old ways don't work. Here's a stereotypical scenario from a year ago:

> **Big Brand Boss:** *"Wow, this Facebook thing is really taking off! Have you heard of this* Mafia Wars? *We've got incredible brands! We should get twice their traffic!"*

> **VP of Marketing:** *[rolls eyes, commences headache]*

> **Big Brand Boss:** *"I've got it! Call the top Facebook game-makers and tell them, for a seven-figure minimum guarantee, we'll license them our brand for a social game!"*

> **VP of Marketing:** *[walks back to her office, sits down, opens browser to Zynga jobs]*

From a Business Perspective: What's So Difficult about Working with Brands?

Two words: "Minimum Guarantee." IP owners know their brands have inherent value. They decline to do a straight revenue-share deal and require a revenue-share plus a minimum guarantee (MG). The MG must be paid regardless of whether or not the game makes money. The game developer creates revenue projections for a branded game and tries to base the MG on that number. At the same time, the IP holder solicits bids from other interested game developers—triggering the brand's best friend: a bidding war.

In this scenario, it's all too easy for the game developer to commit to an MG that exceeds realistic projections. After all, if you don't step up, the brand will go to a competitor. But many millions have been lost by game developers who could not generate enough revenue to cover the MG. And committing to an MG in a new space like social may be especially risky.

From the Development Perspective: What's So Difficult about Working with Brands?

Two words: "Gold Master." When the Game Development Lead gets a contract from the Vice President of Business Development, and it contains the words "Gold Master," he wants to throttle the guy. This archaic term harkens back to the development days of yore when the game development cycle was bogged down by a long, arduous approval process.

by Cooper Moo; *VP of bus. dev.,
GSN Digital & WorldWinner;*
Seattle, WA

After dozens of revisions, months to years later a "Gold Master" would be approved by a big brand—finally.

Social game development is, of course, much different, and a lot simpler:

1. Launch game
2. Iterate regularly (no time for approval process)
3. Repeat

Unfortunately for the Game Development Lead, stringent approval restrictions required by big IP licensors prevent the rapid development necessary to be successful in social games.

To be fair, we can understand the need for approvals from the IP holder's perspective. They cannot simply hand over their valuable IP to a developer and say, "Let me know how it goes!" They have millions, often tens of millions of dollars being generated by their brands every year. They cannot afford to take a chance on a damaging execution with their IP. But as understandable as this is, it's still a serious challenge for game developers.

From the Marketing Perspective: What's So Difficult about Working with Brands?

Twenty-seven words (you know marketing guys): "Freemium micro-transaction business model which may be able to leverage the brand for acquisition but won't retain players unless there is ongoing value in the player experience." In the early days of mobile games, marketers leveraging big brands had it relatively easy. There was no "try before you buy" model; players bought based on their affinity for the brand. Certainly, some mobile game developers signed up for MGs they didn't meet—but many got at least some of their investment back because people bought on the strength of the brand. Market a branded title with good game-play and you were in the money.

The casual download space set the bar much higher. Many reading this article have attended conference sessions entitled "Designing for the 61st Minute" (or something similar). Casual download games use their brand in the usual acquisition role, but the game-play in the 60-minute demo has to be the closer. Market the brand *and* the brand experience, and you're in the money.

The freemium model of social games turns "pay first, play later" on its head. Players expect satisfying game-play for free, and if the experience does not capture or build on the essence of the brand,

the credit card stays in the wallet. The marketing team can't just leverage the brand name as in mobile and they can't just design for the 61st minute; they have to market the brand experience over the long term. And they've got to develop with a restrictive approval process, executing well enough to meet the MG. It's a tricky proposition, but it can be done.

Game Show Gold

iWin is one of the best examples of a game development shop which hit gold with a classic game brand: *Family Feud*—and not just once, but twice. The iWin team launched the download version of the game in 2005. It was a top-selling downloadable game in 2006 and has north of 20 million downloads to date. Then iWin leveraged the same major brand IP to create a bona fide hit in the social space. By May, 2011, *Family Feud* had over 600,000 DAUs on Facebook and had pioneered the "pay per episode" model. *Family Feud* may not be in the top ten, but it's certainly making both iWin and Fremantle, the IP owner, significant incremental revenue in the social space.
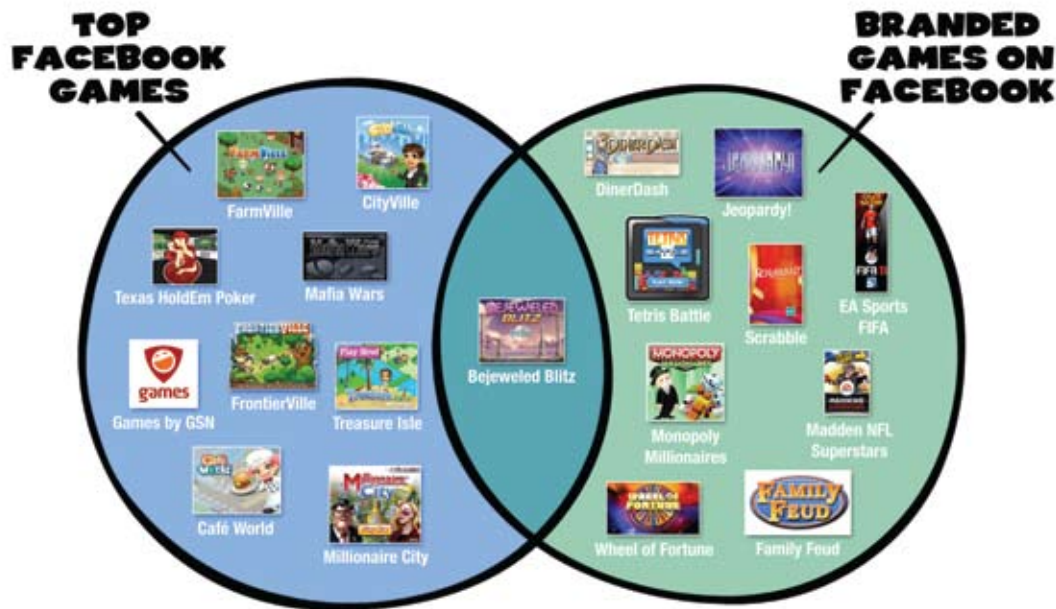
Many millions have been lost by game developers who could not generate enough revenue to cover the minimum guarantee (MG). And committing to an MG in a new space like social may be especially risky.

TOP FACEBOOK GAMES

FarmVille · CityVille · Texas HoldEm Poker · Mafia Wars · Games by GSN · FrontierVille · Treasure Isle · Café World · Millionaire City

Bejeweled Blitz

BRANDED GAMES ON FACEBOOK

DinerDash · Jeopardy! · Tetris Battle · Scrabble · EA Sports FIFA · Monopoly Millionaires · Madden NFL Superstars · Wheel of Fortune · Family Feud

GSN has achieved similar success with game show megabrands Wheel of Fortune and *JEOPARDY!*. The *Wheel of Fortune* social game launched late last year and *JEOPARDY!* went live this March. Since I've got the inside story on this one, I can share a couple of insights. Sony, which owns both Wheel of Fortune and *JEOPARDY!,* has been exceptionally responsive on approval requests. Likewise, GSN has worked hard to stay "on brand." Our GSN Labs team iterates on a regular basis in response to both player demands and the ever-changing social games environment.

As with any successful game, the reason these titles are thriving on Facebook is good game design. Needless to say, no matter how big the brand, if the gameplay isn't fun, the game will ultimately fail. Given good game-play, even brands with no previous game execution can be successful in the social space.

This! Is! Spartacus!

When STARZ decided it wanted a full-on social game to support its show *Spartacus*, it didn't go into the project expecting tens of millions of DAUs. Its goals were to engage its viewers and, as Marc DeBevoise, SVP of Digital Media, Business Development, and Strategy, put it, "create marketing that pays us." STARZ worked with developer Large Animal Games to ensure *Spartacus: The Game* was on brand, giving viewers the experience of buying, training, and fighting with their own team of gladiators. Viewers became players in numbers beyond projections and DAUs for the game actually *increased* after the television show's final episode for the season aired. Even non-game brands can make a successful social game with the right execution.

Say Hello to My Little Branded Virtual Good

Zynga's *Mafia Wars* has been live for over two years and still earns two million DAUs. NBCUniversal, owner of the *Scarface* brand, already knew its way around the games space, having created a console game based on the *Scarface* IP. Still, it opted not to compete with Zynga's *Mafia Wars* by creating its own social game. Instead, it teamed up with Zynga to integrate *Scarface*-branded virtual goods into *Mafia Wars*.

The *Scarface* virtual goods are a great example of leveraging a brand in social games. Zynga was able to incorporate a classic mafia brand into its game experience and NBCUniversal generated revenue from the *Scarface* brand without having its first move in a new space be a risky major project.

Brands: The World Is Yours!

Classic game brands will be increasingly important to social games. They'll bring with them high production values, top-notch customer service, and multimedia tie-ins, all of which will be good for the space. Big brands will work with willing game developers or buy them. EA's *MONOPOLY Millionaires* has done well, ranking in the top 30 game applications on Facebook—making the IP holder, Hasbro Inc., the first big brand house to make the list.

Not unlike the "classic" titles in the download space, the top social games are becoming big brands in their own right. Social game brands will attain the "evergreen" status of classic game brands, becoming games our children will know as well as we do. Here's a stereotypical scenario 10 years from now:

> **Daughter:** *"I just posted a Dragon's Eye."*
>
> **Mom:** *[blinks twice to pull up the Facebook browser in her 20G iGlasses, slides to* Bejeweled Blitz] *"I'm on it."* ❋

Cooper thanks Greg Mills, CJ Wolf and Mike Vorhaus for contributing to this article.

Classic game brands will be increasingly important to social games. They'll bring with them high production values, top-notch customer service, and multimedia tie-ins, all of which will be good for the space.

Don't Call It A Comeback

How Cellular Carriers Can Regain Their Title as Champs of Mobile Gaming

Pundits in the press and trades have been calling for mobile carriers to throw in the towel and give up their role in content distribution. The claim is that carriers are over the hill and should go back to being dumb pipes. For sure, recent challengers have clobbered the game distribution monopoly that carriers once enjoyed. The rise of iPhone, the openness of Android, and the free-flow of ad-supported games have certainly changed the mobile games marketplace for the better.

Don't count carriers out yet. Mobile carriers are not the big dumb heavyweights they are perceived to be; they have rolled with the punches and are still standing. They have experience, endurance, intelligence, money, and a fan-base that will help them go the distance.

The Opening Rounds

Back in the day (the pre-iPhone era), carriers were the undisputed heavyweights of mobile game distribution. About 75 percent of all games were purchased directly on handsets from Verizon, AT&T, Sprint and other carriers. Today, there are scores of alternative app stores, dozens of payment services, and a strong direct-to-consumer effort amongst game developers. The openness has grown the overall market, but hurt the carriers.

	US CARRIER DECK GAME SALES	NON-CARRIER US GAME SALES
2006 (pre-iPhone)	$563 million	$187 million
2009 (App Store opens)	$300 million	$700 million (mostly iPhone)
2010	$250 million	$1 billion (includes Android)
2012 (Rick's prediction)	$1 billion (mostly Android phones)	$2 billion (mostly tablets, half iOS)

Over the past few years, the carrier decks have been dealt blows from all sides:

› Apple forcing carriers to use iTunes
› The openness of Android and Google's Marketplace
› Ad-supported play
› Alternative app stores
› Third-party payment providers

These upstarts and welterweights have challenged the carriers—indeed, have changed the game—but the carriers have more fight left in them. The carriers are down but will bounce back to the benefit of developers. The result will be a mobile game ecosystem not only better than we had five years ago, but also better than what we have today.

TALE OF THE TAPE (US 2011)

	US SUBSCRIBER WEIGHT	APP BILLING REACH
Mobile Carriers	234 million	234 million
Apple iOS	38 million	38 million
Android Marketplace	24 million	~7 million
Amazon	65 million	5 million
Pay Pal	<75 million	<5 million
Facebook	150 million	unknown

So after the recent rope-a-dope in the middle rounds, the carriers have firm legs under them. With their wealth of experience and training behind them, the carriers are poised to score big for both their subscribers and for mobile content publishers.

by Rick Marazzani;
content director, Exent;
San Francisco, CA

Eight Ways Carriers Can Win Back Their Mobile Game Distribution Title

1. SUBSCRIBERS

Punch: Almost all mobile users are subscribers who are attached to their carriers. Subscribers trust their providers, have monthly credit with them, pay them up to $100+ a month, and will be loyal to them for years. Mobile companies have more subscribers around the world than iTunes, Amazon, Android, and Facebook combined! The carriers have almost every potential mobile game buyer in place and market to them every day.

Counterpunch: Carriers may own the voice connections, but users are more loyal than ever to their devices and platforms. Third-party games are available regardless of operator, thus increasing the portability of a user's service. Apple is just the beginning. Facebook, Google, and Apple could knock carriers out completely if they competed for voice access as well as they have done with content.

2. BILLING

Punch: Every one of the carrier subscribers has a direct billing relationship and can buy games and apps with the click of a button. No login, no webpage to access, no SMS to send, no bar code to scan, no PayPal to enter, no credit card number to compromise. One press to pay and play. This is a tremendous feature for users to have easy access to fun on their phone.

Counterpunch: Carriers own the billing, but companies like Visa, PayPal, Amazon, Apple, Walmart, and cable-telcos also have millions of users integrated into their billing.

3. QUALITY

Punch: Carriers use games to increase the ARPU and life-time value of their subscribers. A happy customer is worth thousands of dollars to them. One lousy game can erode subscriber trust and confidence. (Case in point: There are 20,000 games in the Android Marketplace, but only a few hundred of them are any good.) Carriers fight for higher quality games for their users, and will not jeopardize their business for a bad 99-cent game.

Counterpunch: In the past, games offered by carriers all had a generic, hard-scrubbed sameness. On open platforms there is more diversity and risk-taking. Users are often willing to deal with less than perfect UIs and the occasional glitch to experience a fun, innovative game. The next out-of-the-box hit will come from an open platform. Simply put, the new darlings of casual gaming like Rovio, Halfbrick, Bolt Creative, Backflip Studios and Firemint could not have flourished under the carrier-driven system. Why should we put our trust in a group that failed us so severely in the past?

4. OPENNESS

Punch: In the past, carriers had tunnel vision regarding content, and focused on a
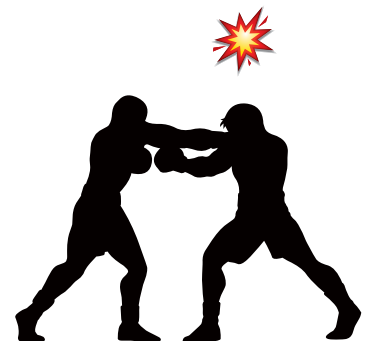
few games and licensed brands. But like Rocky running up the steps to the Philadelphia Museum of Art, carriers have learned that they need to get out of their private gyms to grow. The recent openness in mobile content has shown the carriers that they need to be more aware of putting too tight a grip on their platforms. Open platforms will help bring new games to the surface.

Counterpunch: The carriers do not have a history of openness. It remains to be seen if they can learn from the success of the iTunes App store and Google Marketplace and come up with their own open platform solution which out performs Apple, Google and Amazon.

5. PRICING

Punch: No one wants to leave money on the table. Ninety-nine cents for a great game is nice, but not when it would sell just as well at $4.99. On iTunes, Amazon, and Marketplace, the vast majority of games are free, or close to it, as a way to get attention and gain market share. But cheap or free is not sustainable for premium content.

On carrier decks, games *sell* at a premium price due to greater price elasticity from frictionless payments and the ease of discovery. Lower prices would just be throwing money away. Carriers have the marketing savvy as well as the direct billing in place to find the optimal price for a happy transaction on all sides.

Counterpunch: Just because you give something away for free does not mean the creator makes no money. A myriad of products are often given away for less than the price of manufacture to engage a long term customer ranging from ink cartridges to razor blades to video game consoles. And let's not forget mobile phones which are sold at a loss in order to gain mobile subscribers. Games are no different, gaining a long term player to display advertisements and sell virtual goods is more often than not more profitable than selling them a game, even at the $4.99 price point.

6. MARKETING

Punch: The carriers have decades of experience marketing to and managing their subscribers. A major carrier

spends more than a *billion dollars* a year on advertising and marketing to consumers. On TV, the carriers are usually bragging about their networks, but there is substantial retention and ARPU marketing within the subscriber base. Value-added services like game subscriptions are featured in the constant flow of emails, magazines, newsletters, bill inserts, cable promos, call-center pitches, web page marketing, SMS outreach, and in-store point of purchase.

Counterpunch: I agree. Carriers should spend more on differentiating their services with games, rather than quibbling over who really has 99 percent coverage or .01 percent dropped calls. It is a shame that carriers are not spending more of their billion marketing dollars on games. Good thing we have Apple.

7. INNOVATION

Punch: Intense competition amongst carriers has led to faster networks, better handsets, improved coverage, and lower prices in mobile. The carriers pushed joypads, Nvidia chipsets, faster processors, more memory, better interfaces, etc. Most importantly, carriers subsidize handsets so that mass-market users can afford a powerful cutting edge phone that can play great games. The Droid and iPhone would have been DOA without carrier support and price subsidies. Features like cameras, motion detection, location awareness, 3D chips, and connection to PCs and TV are all driven by carriers. Carriers are pushing next-gen gamer phones like the Sony Xperia PLAY and the Kyocera Echo.

Counterpunch: First: we ask the reader to google 'first mobile camera'. Second, 'the next wave of mobile gaming' will be on devices that are not phones. iPads, tablets, Nooks, and other small touch-screen devices will soon encroach on phone usage. With a data connection and a browser, who needs a voice line when you can IM, Skype, and Facebook? Mobile carriers are likely to get left out of the next generation of mobile altogether.

8. MOM

Punch: The most important reason the carriers will remain the undisputed heavyweight champs of mobile game distribution is … your mother. Most people are regular folks—mass-market gamers who just want to casually play. They are happy to use the service provided by their carrier, and will play what is promoted.

At a restaurant, most people order from the menu. And the specials of the day often sell out. Moreover, when the waiter says, "I recommend the fish tonight," it sells even better.

Carriers own the menu, and control the icons and apps that ship on their phones (except iPhone). Most users will be content to click the *Play This Game Now* button on their phones rather than dig through various non-carrier solutions.

Counterpunch: In the years before smartphones, carriers had never been able to motivate the mass-market to buy games from them. At best, fewer than five percent of subscribers have ever bought a game. This might change once carriers launch their smartphone decks, but they are behind. Alternative app stores like Amazon, Marketplace and GetJar have already opened up mobile gaming to the mass-market with greater penetration than the carriers were ever able to obtain. No one thinks of carriers as game providers anymore.

DING! DING! DING!

Don't count the carriers out yet. You can still earn iTunes revenue while placing carrier app store bets. Bet on both sides and diversify your portfolio by considering the changes your free or discounted games will need to succeed on a carrier deck at a premium price. The carriers are down but will bounce back, diversifying the mobile industry to the benefit of developers. The result will be the *best* mobile game ecosystem we have ever had. So get ready to *RUMBLE!* ❈

That Little Bit Extra

Improvement Through Communication and Observation

When we started our business in September 2008, we wanted to offer our customers both high-quality games and "that little bit extra". In fact, we didn't just want to—we had to. After all, there are already a number of big providers on the German market, and the casual skill games market in Germany is still quite small. This opportunity—and growth potential!—was something we wanted to take advantage of. The question was this: Could we successfully deliver enough of "that little bit extra" to distinguish ourselves from others in the space.

We determined that there are two primary ways for us to make and maintain contact with customers: communication and observation. Both ways are not only important sources of information, but also represent key customer loyalty tools.

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Communication

There is a very simple way to establish a dialogue with your customers: offer them the chance, in as many ways as possible. We welcome customer questions, feedback and complaints and take them all very seriously. And as a consequence, customer retention increases and loyalty to the platform grows. That's why we offer a number of channels for customer communication.

E-MAIL SERVICE AND FREE HOTLINE

These are obligatory. We keep our service center well-equipped and well-staffed. We use frequent training sessions to maintain a close connection to the company. Even when making e-mail inquiries, customers can expect a personalized, informed response.

COMMUNITY BLOG

Through the community blog we share information about special leagues, competitions, new games and other developments related to the platform or to individual games. We also take advantage of social media channels (Facebook, Myspace, Twitter) to keep our fans informed.

LOBBY CHAT

The lobby chat allocated to each game provides an opportunity for the rapid exchange of information. Twenty-seven trained game moderators answer questions daily. They are clearly recognizable as moderators in the chat and can be addressed directly to get quick answers about game-play and rules. Lobby chat also enables participants to communicate with one another.

USER SURVEYS

Ongoing user surveys (via the platform or newsletter) enable us to better understand user tendencies and game-play.

When we hear that improvement is needed—that the ball doesn't roll as it should, for example, or that we should introduce an additional mode, we take these ideas seriously. They are collected and evaluated at regular intervals.

Observation

We also know that actions often speak louder than words—and actions can be observed. This is where tracking tools come in. How does the customer respond to advertisements? Which customers respond? Do they visit just once or return multiple times? The

more we observe our customers, the clearer the answers.

Before making big changes, we also consult professional observers to assess customer acceptance and usability. These user experience tests provide valuable insight regarding customer perceptions and usage and help us identify potential problems while still in development. In addition to direct feedback from testers, we track their individual movements on the portal and collect eye-tracking data (the frequency and length of glances at individual page elements). This data provides a reliable source

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of information on functionality when combined with conscious impressions. Often relatively small corrections can improve the perception and use of individual game elements and increase overall quality of play.

Customer-driven Improvements

Over the years, we have implemented a number of game enhancements that have come as a direct result of our communications with and observations of customers. To name just a few:

LOBBY RE-LAUNCH

Our customers wanted us to redesign the lobby so that they would have the option of opening their own rounds for multiplayer games. While we were at it, we also freshened up the look of the games lobby and made it clearer.

CHAT ALTERATION

Our customers also told us that they wanted more customer-friendly chat. The new chat display now lists player contacts as well as the official games moderator.

FOLLOW-UPS

9 Ball and *Multi Knobeln* are both follow-up games. Their successful predecessors are so-called single player games. The follow-up games, in contrast, are offered in multiplayer mode, enabling several participants to play the same round simultaneously.

SCHEDULING

Sometimes we adjust our development schedule based on customer demands. For instance, we made *Skat* and *Backgammon* higher priorities due to numerous requests.

by Sven Ivo Brinck; *proxy, Tipp24 Entertainment;* **Hamburg, Germany**

Conclusion

Take the time to watch your customers and listen to their feedback. Satisfied customers will not only bring in more money, but they will also help you attract new customers as you improve your products and services based on their input. By listening and observing, we have grown constantly since that day in 2008 when we determined to offer "that little bit extra". ❉
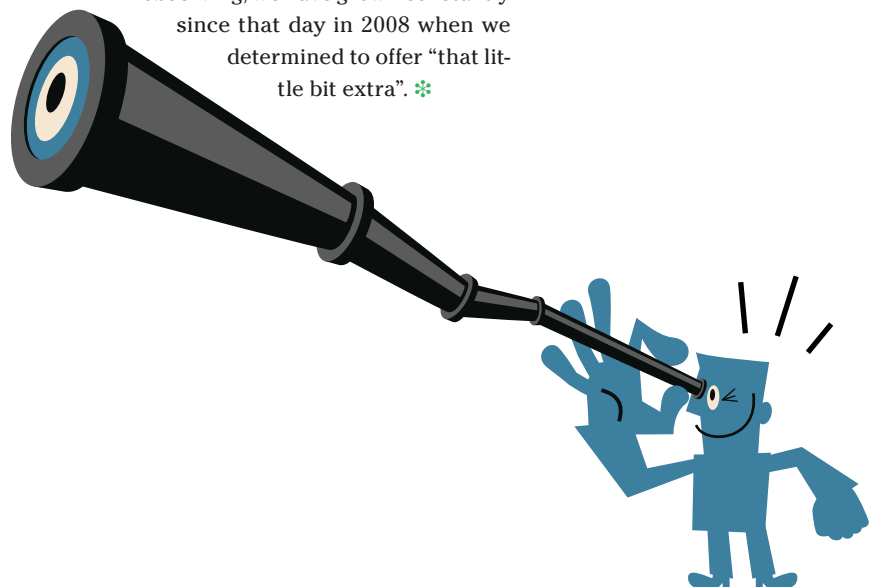
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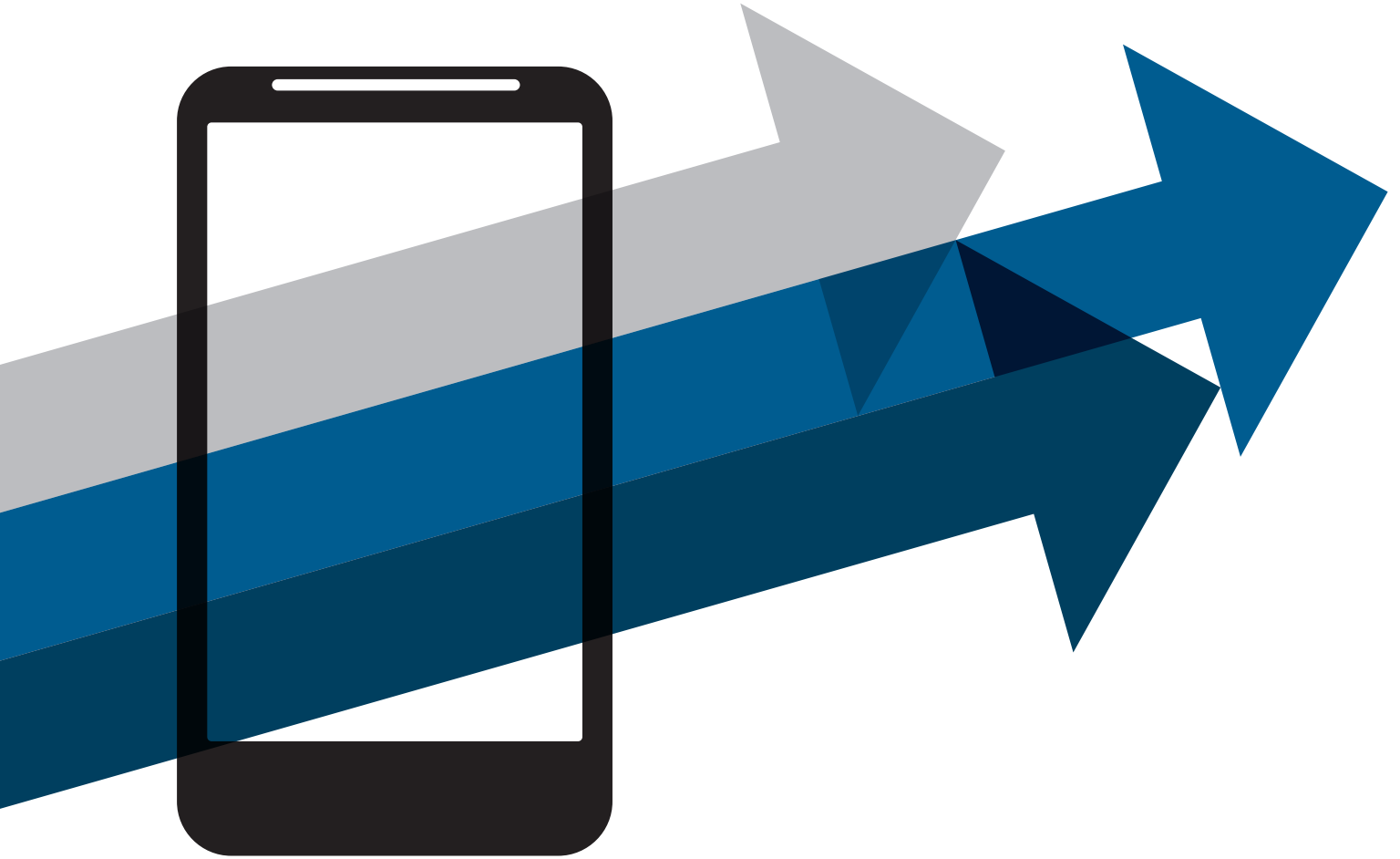
The Tapjoy Android fund has capital for select developers of Android apps.

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FUELING GREAT APPS

by Shirin Ardakani; *art director;* **San Francisco, CA**

Epic Win for Gamers, Creators of Games, and the Rest of Us

A Review of Jane McGonigal's *Reality Is Broken*

Want to save the world? Jane McGonigal says that gamers just may be the ones to do it. In her book, *Reality Is Broken*, she argues that active gamers are becoming virtuosos of key 21st century core competencies, like resilience, creative problem-solving, and collaboration. The massive potential lies in harnessing these skills and directing them toward solving extreme-scale problems—

> Drawing on research based in positive psychology and sociology, she writes about crowd sourcing, participation bandwidth, Wikipedia as an MMORPG, and Sony's philanthropic initiative Folding@home—all within a chapter she entitles "The Engagement Economy."

from ending poverty to preventing catastrophic climate change. And she suggests that the masterminds behind the games—the makers of the games themselves—are our best hope to help take us there.

"Do you dream about creating worlds imbued with real value and consequence?" she asks. "Can you find the fine line between a reward that encourages players to have fun and an incentive that en-slaves them? Can you devise a way for a player to grow while preserving a delicate game balance? If you answered yes to these questions, you might want to polish up your résumé and apply to be Bungie's next Player Investment Design Lead."

Yes, yes, and yes!

I still consider myself new to the game industry, a world which I am a part of only peripherally. I am enjoying learning about it and was excited to read Jane McGonigal's book, but I did not expect to find in its pages a description of a dream job in which I imagine I could thrive even though I am a designer of a different sort. It's a prime example of how inspiring and persuasive McGonigal is, and most of all, how tuned in she is to the zeitgeist. She has a strong sense of the ways our world is changing and of digital gaming's role in it.

Drawing on research based in positive psychology and sociology, she writes about crowd sourcing, participation bandwidth, Wikipedia as an MMORPG, and Sony's phil-anthropic initiative, Folding@home—all with-in a chapter she entitles "The Engagement Economy." She writes: "In the engagement economy, we're not competing for 'eyeballs' or 'mindshare.' We're competing for br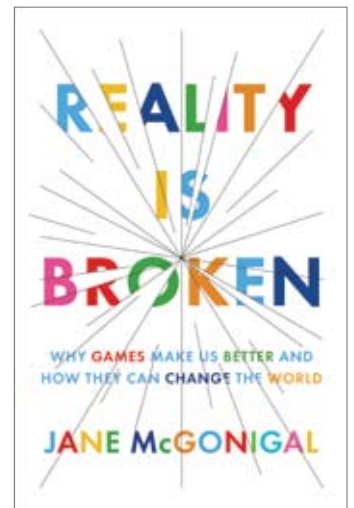ain cycles and heart share." Success will come from providing "the kind of engagement that in-creases our personal and collective participation bandwidth by motivating us to do more, for longer, toward collective ends. And no one knows how to augment our collective capacity for engagement bet-ter than game developers."

This leads to the eleventh of her proposed 14 Fixes: A Sustainable Engagement Economy. "Com-pared with games," she says, "reality is unsustain-

able. The gratification we get from playing games is an infinitely renewable resource."

She uses this device to relate the virtual world of gaming to reality. The Fixes are sprinkled throughout the book, roughly one per chapter. In each case, she makes a similar contrast: "Compared to games, reality is X."

Normally such devices are helpful when reading a lengthy book on a dense, multifaceted, and perhaps unfamiliar topic. McGonigal appreciates the complexities of her topic and spends most of the book diving deep into them, one shade of gray mixing with the next and the next. In contrast, her Fixes tend to oversimplify, representing nuanced shades of gray as if they are unambiguously black-and-white. Consequently, her Fixes tend to undermine her otherwise persuasive arguments. "Compared to games, reality is too easy… or depressing… or unproductive." Such superficial statements weaken an otherwise compelling argument.

The one Fix that did resonate strongly with me, however, was Fix #3: More Satisfying Work. "Compared with games," she says, "reality is unproductive. Games give us clearer missions and more satisfying, hands-on work." As she begins to elaborate, she writes, "Satisfying work always starts with two things: a clear goal and actionable next steps towards achieving that goal." I love my work as a graphic designer but I do have the occasional fantasy about chucking it all and taking on a simple, straightforward trade, like carpentry or plumbing. The prospect of having a clear, unambiguous goal, achievable through reliance on well-established, agreed-upon rules and parameters, is alluring. The solid satisfaction and sense of accomplishment that come from attaching point A to point B to get predictable result C is unusual in my day-to-day. Yes, because of schooling, aptitude, and practice, my judgment around how to best communicate content is taken seriously, but there is no way to prove to myself or my client that the choices are "correct." There is no proven guarantee that using the font Futura or printing in red will attract the biggest crowd. That crystal clear sense of accomplishment is elusive.

McGonigal submits that casual games are an important antidote to the frustration that can result from contending with ambiguity and a lack of tangible results. Casual games, she says, are "microexamples of games that generate a rewarding sense of capability and productivity," providing satisfying work in "very quick bursts of productive play." I can testify to the real need for such outlets and the positive impact from taking a break to play 20 minutes of *Angry Birds* or *Liqua Pop*. And I'm not the only one. McGonigal cites a recent major survey of high-level executives (CEOs, CFOs, and Presidents) that revealed that 70 percent of them regularly take 15 minute to one-hour breaks to play casual computer games throughout their workday. Half of them said they play in order "to feel more productive". Such a statement seems counterintuitive, but it "speaks to how much we all crave simple, hands-on work that feels genuinely productive. We turn to games to help us alleviate the frustrating sense that, in our real work, we're often not making any progress or impact."

This positive impact of casual games is not inconsequential. Neither is the flood of other remarkable findings her research uncovers. I have merely scratched the surface here. I fit squarely within her larger target audience, but I can't think of anybody who wouldn't benefit from reading *Reality Is Broken*.

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McGonigal's bio states that "she believes game designers are on a humanitarian mission—and her #1 goal in life is to see a game developer win a Nobel Peace Prize." Preposterous, you say? Sure, just as preposterous as the idea that a game in which you slingshot cranky wingless birds to free eggs from green pigs in construction hats could be considered "the largest mobile app success the world has seen." Game designers have the imagination, creativity—dare I say responsibility?—to contribute to making her Nobel Prize goal a reality. Who knows? It could be you stepping up to accept the award, cheered on from the audience by Ms. McGonigal herself. ❈

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Someone has to think about
the business models

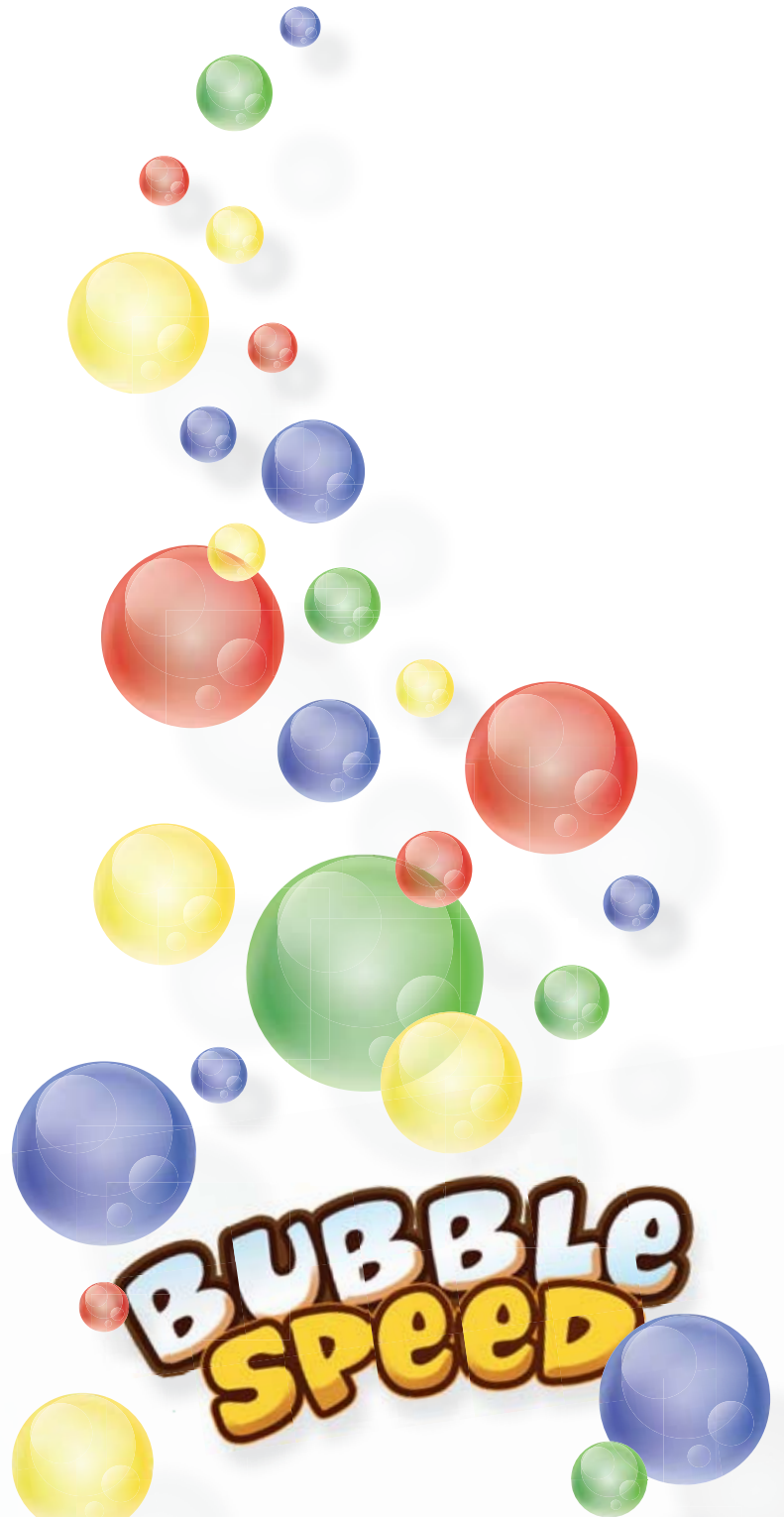**1995**   **2005**   **2010**   **2022**

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